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The Perspectives of Head Start Employed Community College Students who Earned an Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education Programs: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Challenges and Successes

by

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Abstract

The U.S. federally funded Head Start programs serve more than one million low-income children and their families each year in education and health programs. Historically there have been few requirements for formal education for Head Start teachers. In response to research linking teacher education and outcomes for children, increased educational requirements were included in the program funding reauthorizations in recent decades. For a variety of reasons, community college early childhood education programs are a logical place for those already employed by Head Start to improve their qualifications. At the same time, these institutions tend to have low graduation rates, and the Head Start employed students are likely to experience many of the barriers other adult learners face in pursuing their associate degrees. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe and explore the experiences of a small group of Head Start employed students who earned their associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs. Five themes emerged in the study that illuminate the barriers these students faced and the factors that contributed to their success. Specifically, the findings make evident that the participants were juggling complex lives, benefited from support from their "whole world," and experienced an evolving sense of self-belief. Based on these findings, I argue that community colleges must know the Head Start employed student, and, further, all students, and design programs and offer resources that meet their needs. Additionally, the findings imply the necessity to involve faculty in these student success efforts.

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Chapter 1: Statement of Problem

More than one million of the nation's most vulnerable children are served each year by the federally funded Head Start programs (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), 2019). In recent decades, the U.S. federal government mandated that more of the Head Start teaching staff hold college degrees amid growing pressure to improve program outcomes. Having historically provided access to higher education to a student population much like the Head Start employee group, community colleges have been a logical partner in achieving these mandates (Cavanagh et al., 2010). Unfortunately, community college students typically face a variety of barriers to degree completion, and less than half of those who enroll achieve degrees (Fong et al., 2016; Ozaki, 2016; Wyner, 2014). The literature shows that certain institutional practices and student characteristics affect how successful students are in completing college (Bailey et al., 2015). While improving completion rates for all community college students is important, supporting degree completion for the Head Start workforce should be considered especially critical due to the important role these individuals play in the lives of the nation's children.

In this chapter, I provide background related to the community college, Head Start, and the intersection between the two in the Head Start employed student. I conclude the chapter with an overview of my phenomenological research study in which I describe and explore the responses of Head Start employed students to their experiences in the early childhood community college programs where they received their associate

degrees. Also included at the end of this chapter are definitions of key terms used in this dissertation.

Background of the Problem

Over the past two decades, Head Start, a federally funded program for young children living in poverty and their families, has instituted new educational requirements for its teaching staff based on stipulations in the federal government funding reauthorizations (Kaplan & Mead, 2017). The program's need for a culturally and linguistically diverse workforce and its commitment to hiring parents and low-income community members, often resulted in educating existing staff in order to meet these mandates (Kaplan, 2018; Kaplan & Mead, 2017; E. B. Miller, 2017). For a variety of reasons, including cost and course availability (Spellman, 2007), community college early childhood education programs are a logical place for Head Start employed students to seek their degrees. Unfortunately, as with the broader student population community colleges serve, the Head Start employed students will likely face many barriers to degree completion (Bailey, Jenkins et al., 2005; Juszkiewicz, 2020; Ma & Baum, 2016; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). In the next section I briefly discuss the community college in the United States and community college students.

The Community College

Nearly 40% all students enrolled in college in the United States attend community college (Bailey, 2018; Osam et al., 2017). One of the primary purposes of the community college is to provide postsecondary education opportunities for students who might not otherwise have access due to financial, geographic, and academic constraints (Boone,

1997; Goho & Blackman, 2004; Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018). Students may come to the community college for personal enrichment, a vocational or career technical certificate or degree, or in preparation for transfer to a university (Fong et al., 2016; M. T. Miller et al., 2005). O'Banion (2019) provided this definition of the community college:

> The primary purpose of the community college is to ensure that students are prepared to make a good living and live a good life. It is an open-door institution that accepts all who can benefit from its programs and services. It is a comprehensive institution that offers a variety of programs and opportunities to meet the needs of its diverse population. It is grounded in its local community but serves national and global needs when opportunities arise. It is Democracy's College, ever evolving. (p. 27)

Community colleges serve as both an entry point to higher education and a re-entry point for adults who are already in the workforce (Kaplan, 2018).

Community College Students. The community college serves 18- to 22-year-old full-time students, but it also serves a dramatically different population of adult students (M. T. Miller et al., 2005; Osam et al., 2017). While about half of all community college students are 21 years or younger, the average age is 28 years (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). Community college students are less likely than their university counterparts to have attended college immediately following high school, and more likely to be more than 24 years of age, financially responsible for themselves and dependents, and to enroll in college part time (Juszkiewicz, 2020). Community college students come from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Cejda & Leist, 2006). According to the Community College Research Center (CCRC) (2021), in 2018-2019, "the community college student population was 7% Asian, 13% Black, 25% Latino, and 45% White" (para. 11). Of the total population of undergraduate students in the U.S. in 2018, 55% of Hispanic, 45% of Asian, 44% of Black, and 41% of White

students were enrolled in community colleges. The percentage of students who enroll in community college from low-income families is considerably higher than that of students from higher income families. The CCRC (2021) reported, in 2011-2012, 55% of students from families earning less than $30,000 enrolled in community college, while only 23% of students who were from families earning over $106,000 enrolled in community college. Edgecombe (2019) explained, "As low cost institutions in proximity to home and family, community colleges have increasingly emerged as crucial access points for students from racial and ethnic groups historically underrepresented in higher education (p. 215). Moreover, there is a higher likelihood that these students will be challenged to afford tuition, experience a lack of academic preparation, and face overcoming discrimination and social systems that have created disadvantage (Bragg et al., 2006; Edgecombee, 2019; Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016). Students of Color may have experienced educational settings in which unspoken messages and formal school curriculum reinforced social inequalities (Villegas et al., 2012). As Falcon (n.d.) explained, "opportunities have been limited for certain ethnic and racial populations and for those of lower socioeconomic status" (p. 1), which adds to the challenge of college for these students and pushes them further from its benefits.

Benefits of Community College. Studies from the past two decades indicate students are likely to benefit financially and socially from a community college education. As Hoggan and Browning (2019) explained, community college enables full participation in "the broader social, economic, and civic spheres" (p. 1). Earning a degree creates employment security and a potential buffer to poverty (Damaske et al., 2017;

Evans et al., 2017). Additionally, as students attain skills and education in postsecondary settings, they may experience a lessening of a sense of powerlessness and benefits that will extend into all areas of their life (Young, 2000).

Community college students earning either a certificate or degree are more likely to report positive employment outcomes (Hoachlander et al., 2003; Juszkiewicz, 2020). Even though they found that the direct effect could be over-stated, Kane and Rouse (1999) concluded that evidence suggests community college education is associated with higher wages and increased aggregate educational attainment—a conclusion that continues to hold true. Dadgar and Weiss (2012) found that associate degrees "increase wages, the likelihood of being employed, and hours worked" (p. 2). Kim and Tamborini (2019) reported, "annual earnings, cumulative twenty-year earnings, and earnings growth of all sub-baccalaureate groups including vocational certificates and diploma are higher over early to mid-adulthood than comparable high school graduates" (p. 65). On average, early educators who earn their associate degree will experience a wage bump, with Head Start offering the greatest wage advantage for those earning this degree (Whitebook et al., 2018).

Head Start

The Head Start program was launched in 1965 by President Lyndon Johnson as part of his Great Society to offer early education and health services to preschool-age children (Cavanagh et al., 2010). What may be less widely known is that as part of the War on Poverty, the program was also intended to offer employment opportunities to adults living in poverty (Zigler, 2010). Today, Head Start continues to serve more than

one million children each year through its various programs, and has expanded to include programs for infants and toddlers and the provision of in-home services (ECLKC, 2019). The program also employs more than 250,000 people, many of whom come from cultural and socio-economic backgrounds similar to those of the children and families served (Cavanagh et al., 2010; ECLKC, 2019).

Educational Requirements for Head Start Staff. From the beginning, the educational requirements for Head Start staff were low and many teachers were hired with little to no professional education or experience (Zigler, 2010). Moreover, while the prioritization of parents in the hiring process contributes to a staff that reflects the linguistic and cultural diversity of the local community and thus the children and families served, they are likely not formally educated in early childhood development and the education of young children (Cavanagh et al., 2010). However, in recent decades, as understanding of the importance of early learning has grown, and Head Start programs have faced scrutiny regarding their outcomes, there has been growing consensus that teachers should have formal education and credentials (Whitebook et al., 2005; Zigler, 2010). Specifically, the widely publicized study by the National Research Council linking teacher education and outcomes for children (Bowman et al., 2001) and the ongoing challenge to provide conclusive evidence that Head Start improves school readiness, spurred a series of educational mandates linked to the reauthorization of federal funding (Cavanagh et al., 2010; Whitebook et al., 2010). Significant among these were the 1998 mandate that 50% of all Head Start teachers in classroom programs earn associate degrees by 2003 and the 2007 mandate that 50% of lead teachers have bachelor's degrees

by 2013 (Cavanagh et al., 2010; Whitebook et al., 2010). As of 2015, nearly three quarters of all Head Start lead teachers held bachelor's degrees. However, the number of degree holders is significanlty lower for Migrant and Tribal Head Start, with 50% and 39% of teachers holding bachelor's degrees, respectively (Kaplan & Mead, 2017). Current minimum Head Start hiring qualifications require that all lead preschool teachers hold at least an associate degree in early childhood or a related field and that all assistant teachers hold an associate degree in early childhood or a related field or be enrolled in a degree or Child Development Associate program (National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning, 2018). The latest Head Start reauthorization included an increase in qualifications for for Early Head Start, creating another group of already employed staff who will need to increase their credentials in the coming years (Kaplan, 2018).

Head Start and the Community College Connection

Considering the evolving federal educational mandates Head Start staff and administrators faced, and the ongoing need for qualified teachers, it should come as no surprise that over the past two decades they have turned to community college early childhood education programs. Community colleges have historically responded to the workforce needs in their communities and been an important part of educating the early childhood workforce (Kaplan, 2018). Additionally, many universities did not historically offer early childhood education programs, since most states have not necessarily required bachelor's degrees for their early childhood workforce (Kaplan & Mead, 2017). Community colleges also have a track record of serving the very students who make up

the Head Start employee population (Cavanagh et al., 2010), having served as an access point to higher education for low income and historically underrepresented students (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). The Head Start workforce is primarily women, culturally and linguistically diverse, caring for family members, and earning an average wage that is below the poverty level (Cavanagh et al., 2010). Given the similarities between the Head Start workforce and the community college student population, it is likely that these students will face similar barriers to degree completion that the broader community college student population faces, such as balancing work and school and navigating college systems (Evans et al., 2017).

Community College Student Success

Educational institutions at all levels are facing increased expectations from stakeholders to be accountable for the effectiveness of their programs (Millea et al., 2018; Perry, 2001). One of the common measures of success for postsecondary institutions is graduation with a certificate or degree (Horn & Nevill, 2006; Millea et al., 2018). Nationwide, nearly half of all community college students do not attain degrees (Bailey, Calcagno et al., 2005; Dougherty et al., 2017). Though this might not be surprising considering the myriad of challenges their students face (Dougherty et al., 2017), it is widely considered unacceptable by policy makers, community college leaders, and students (Cejda & Leist, 2006). As Gellman-Danley and Martin (2019) explained, “public and government officials alike are increasingly asking for institutions to demonstrate their effectiveness and that such institutional effectiveness (IE) be rooted in evidence and not mere intuition” (p. 129).

Community college student success is frequently measured using quantitative methods, linking numerical data to institutional initiatives and practices (Bailey et al., 2015; Cejda & Leist, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2006,). Information about early childhood education students in community college early childhood education programs is limited to broad demographic data (Kaplan, 2018). Further, while there is an emerging body of literature that includes the voices of students through individual personal accounts of their experiences, and multiple studies highlighting the impact of individual student characteristics and psychosocial factors on their success (Bailey, Jenkins et al., 2005; Fong et al., 2016; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015), none of these focus on the Head Start employed community college student. Phillips et al. (2016) implored that moving beyond incremental improvements in quality of care and education requires that research focus on, among other things, the preparation of early childhood teachers.

As I have discussed, community college offers an affordable, geographically convenient, and open enrollment postsecondary option for working adults. However, many of the students who enroll do not complete a degree. Head Start employed teachers who have earned an associate degree from a community college early childhood education program have met the most common, and arguably the most critical, measure of student success by graduating. They have also likely overcome numerous challenges in doing so.

In addition to the benefits they may experience in their own life with degree attainment, this accomplishment will likely improve the quality of their work with children and families. A review of 10 years of teacher responses from the Head Start

Family and Child Experiences survey found that educated Head Start teachers consistently held the most appropriate beliefs about children and, further, that national increases in teacher education have the ability to impact children's everyday classroom experiences (Walter & Lippard, 2017). And, while the results are mixed in studies aiming to link teacher education and children's academic outcomes, studies consistently link classroom quality and more appropriate beliefs about children to teacher education (Lin & Magnuson, 2018; Walter & Lippard, 2017).

Purpose Statement and Significance of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the responses of Head Start employed students to their experiences in community college early childhood education programs in which they earned associate degrees; potentially enabling these programs to better meet the needs of this specific subset of students. The study may also inform practice that affects other students in community college early childhood education programs or even the broader community college student population.

The Head Start program needs a workforce that meets the U. S. federal educational requirements and the needs of the diverse population of children and families the program serves. Community colleges are an accessible and affordable avenue to higher education for students such as the Head Start employed student. However, the degree completion rate for community college students is consistently below 50% (Bailey et al., 2015; Bailey, Jenkins et al., 2005; Evans et al., 2017). The research identifies the barriers students face and factors that can contribute to community college success. There is a growing body of stories from community college students themselves, though they

are not widely represented in the literature. Missing entirely from the literature are the voices of the Head Start employed student. With this in mind, the experience of the Head Start employed student is important to understand.

The Need for Educated Head Start Teachers

This study is significant because of the ongoing need to educate Head Start employees in our nation's community college early childhood education programs, but the true significance lies in the in the work for which we are preparing these students. As articulated by Phillips et al. (2016):

> As the science of early childhood development and learning has advanced, so too has our understanding of the complex demands that early childhood teachers face. In essence, early childhood teachers are responsible for three interrelated goals: to provide young children with high-quality interactions and environments for early learning; to protect them from the consequences of stress, disruption, and chaos that can arise both outside and within the classroom; and to prepare them to grow up and make a meaningful contribution to a highly diverse society. (p. 147)

The work of early childhood educators in general, and Head Start teachers in particular, is important work. However, since Head Start met the federal mandate that 50% of preschool teachers hold a bachelor's degree by 2013, some may ask if the consideration of how the Head Start employed student can be successful in community college early childhood education programs continues to be important. While Head Start successfully met and exceeded that initial benchmark, community colleges will likely continue to play an important role in educating Head Start employed students. Early childhood education faces a high level of turnover among teachers (Wells, 2015) and, as has been mentioned, Head Start is committed to a diverse, local workforce, and continuing to hire Head Start parents. As Kaplan (2018) noted, "community colleges play an important role in

educating the early childhood workforce today—and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future" (p. 5).

As described above, community colleges are generally more accessible to working adults geographically and economically. Moreover, while options are expanding at universities, three quarters of the 1,074 community colleges in the United States offer early childhood education programs (Kaplan, 2018). Community colleges' open access programs and options for part time enrollment also offer the flexibility that working adults, such as the Head Start employee or parent who gets hired into an entry-level position, need. As the education requirements for Head Start assistant teachers and those employed by the Early Head Start Program expand, the associate degree is required for more staff members. Community college early childhood education programs help serve these staff members who offer culturally responsive services to children and their families in their primary language.

Diverse Children, Families, and Teachers. The population of the United States is rapidly becoming more economically, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse, but the gap has continued to grow between the diversity of the student demographic and the diversity of the educator demographic (Boser, 2011; Espinosa, 2010; Oregon Education Investment Board, 2014). And, while the Head Start teaching staff is racially and ethnically diverse, the diversity and percentage of this group who speak a language other than English has remained basically the same in the last two decades (Hamm, 2006; Office of Head Start, 2019). It is critical that teachers are able to foster a positive sense of self, support the learning needs of all children, and recognize that children's experiences

vary based on their social identities (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Teachers of color are uniquely situated to facilitate learning in a way that draws upon a child's home culture (Villegas et al., 2012). Using data from 700 classrooms in 11 states, Downer et al., (2016) found that when teachers' racial or ethnic identity matched that of children in their classrooms it "seemed to play an important role in teachers' initial perceptions of children and in children's academic and social gains during the pre-k year" (p. 36).

Currently, 42% of families enrolled in Head Start programs self-identified as Hispanic/Latino and 22% as African American. Over one third of families spoke a language other than English at home, with 24% of children being primarily spoken to in a language other than English in their homes (ECLKC, 2019; Tarullo et al., 2017). The Head Start program is committed to responding to the cultures in the community with respect. The program has outlined 10 principles that support this commitment, which include every individual is rooted in culture, the cultural groups represented in the communities and families of each Head Start program are the primary source for culturally relevant programming, and culturally relevant programming requires staff who both reflect and are responsive to the community and families served (ECLKC, 2020).

Also, included in the Head Start Performance Standards is the expectation that these programs serve their diverse constituency of children and families using culturally and linguistically appropriate practices that recognize their bilingualism and biliteracy as strengths (Cavanagh et al., 2010; ECLKC, 2016). The preschool years are a crucial time

for identity and language development (Schickedanz & Collins, 2012; Tabors & Snow, 2008)). As Espinosa (2010) explained:

> When linguistically diverse children enter school, they encounter classroom cultures that differ markedly from their familiar home culture. Children who are not native English speakers face many challenges because the language they have used to form their mental concepts and gain control over their cognitive processes is no longer dominant. The social and cognitive skills that have been developed through the use of one language and cultural context may no longer apply to this new setting. (p. 75)

Beyond the classroom experience for young children, the Head Start program focuses on engaging the whole family through supportive relationships, focusing on the parent-child relationship and ongoing learning and development opportunities for both parents and children (ECLKC, 2014). Engaging parents in development and leadership activities, coupled with the prioritization of parents in the hiring process (Schumacher, 2003) has helped ensure a more diverse teaching staff (Cavanagh et al., 2010). In 2019, 23% of the staff employed by Head Start were parents of current or former Head Start children (ECLKC, 2019). Considering that parents must meet the minimum qualifications for open positions (Schumacher, 2003), they are likely to qualify for lower paid entry-level positions within the organization, such as teacher assistant or cook. Given that these employees may be more likely to be committed to the mission, hiring and educating parents and local community members may combat the high turnover rate Head Start programs generally face (Burstein, 2019).

In light of the federal education mandates, I would argue that it is primarily through opportunities to participate in community college early childhood education programs that the diverse entry-level staff members and parents, who reflect the local communities in which Head Start programs operate, will continue to earn their degrees

and advance to teaching positions. Community colleges are affordable, local, and have historically served a student body similar to the Head Start employee population (Ma & Baum, 2016). However, since community colleges have also historically had low completion rates, it is important to hear from the community college students themselves about their experiences. Identifying both barriers that exist and practices that work in supporting the development of these staff is critical to supporting their success as students and completion of degrees.

Methods

This study employed a phenomenological methodology to describe and explore the responses of Head Start employed students to their experiences in the early childhood community college programs in which they received their associate degree. As van Manen (1997) explained, "from a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings" (p. 5). This methodology was selected to focus on the student experience because it is intended to be descriptive and does not require fitting the participants' experience into a particular theoretical model (Wertz et al., 2011). The data collected through in-depth individual interviews and follow-up focus groups were analyzed for themes using a reflective process (Morgan, 2011). The participants all completed their associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs while employed by Head Start. The individual and focus group interviews attempted to delve deeply into the perspective of these students about their experinces. As explained by Flyvbjerg (2006), random samples that emphasize representativeness and focus on

frequencies seldom provide this type of insight. Specifically, the phenomenological methodology brings to our consciousness an awareness of the details, both consequential and inconsequential, of our educational lives (van Manen, 1997).

This study can inform the work of early childhood education associate degree programs that continue to educate students already employed in the field, in particular Head Start employed students. In addition, because of potential similarities between the Head Start employed student and the community college student population as a whole, this research contributes to the overall understanding of community college student success. The perspective of these students should also be of interest to university early childhood education programs where Head Start employed students may go on to seek bachelor's degrees. Lastly, it is my belief that the reflective process that was inherent in the study held value for the participants themselves.

Research Questions

The research questions that served to guide this study are:

Research question: How do individuals who completed their associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs, while employed in Head Start programs, perceive their experience?

Sub-question 1: What challenges or barriers do these individuals report?

Sub-question 2: What factors do these students identify as contributing to their success?

The following chapters describe and explore the experiences of Head Start teachers in the community college early childhood community college programs from

which they received their associate degrees using a phenomenological perspective. The literature review that follows provided the background and framework for designing the study and analyzing the data collected.

Definitions of Key Terms

This list includes the definitions for key terms that are used throughout this dissertation.

Associate Degree: Associate degrees are granted by institutions of higher education in the United States and generally reflect the completion of two years of study or the equivalent. Degrees may be in general education or specific areas of study.

Community College: Community colleges are publicly funded institutions of higher education in the United States providing primarily lower-division coursework and preparation for specific career fields. Historically community colleges have focused on providing access to higher education and training (Boggs, 2019) in local communities or districts.

Child Development Associate: The Child Development Associate (CDA) is a professional certification in early childhood education offered through the Council for Professional Recognition granted based on the completion of 120 hours of training, work experience in early childhood settings, and the submission of a portfolio (Council for Professional Recognition, n.d.).

Degree Completion: Degree completion refers to completing all of the coursework and requirements and graduating with the associate degree.

Head Start: Head Start is a U.S. federally funded program promoting "school readiness for children in low-income families by offering educational, nutritional, health, social, and other services" (ECLKC, 2019, para. 1). Early Head Start serves families during the prenatal period to age three.

Lived Experience: According to van Manen (1997), lived experience is the "starting point and end point of phenomenological research" (p. 36). It "implicates the totality of life" (p. 36), and through reflective consideration of it humans "assign meaning to the phenomena of lived life" (p. 37).

Phenomenology: Phenomenology, as a research method, is derived from the phenomenological philosophical tradition and includes the collection and examination of "first person accounts of direct experience with a phenomenon" (Morgan, 2011, p. 70).

Postsecondary Education: Postsecondary education in the United States follows secondary, or high school, education or the attainment of a General Education Diploma (GED).

Student Success: Student success in the community college literature generally refers to students completing their education goals, typically graduation with a certificate or degree (Bailey et al., 2015). Further, student success also encompasses whether students acquire shills and meet identified learning outcomes (Wyner, 2014). Student success initiatives encompass a broad range of activities intended to promote these goals.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Head Start programs have faced numerous education mandates for their staff in recent decades from the federal government. While the specific data are not readily available, it is likely these mandates have, at least in part, been met through existing staff completing community college certificates and degrees. As with most of the broader population of students served by community colleges, these students would have faced barriers to completion at the community college that they would ultimately need to overcome to progress successfully in their education (Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2006; Karp, 2016). This study describes and aims to understand the experiences of Head Start employed students in the community college early childhood education programs where they received their associate degrees. In this chapter, I describe the theoretical perspective for the study and analyze literature relevant to community college students and the Head Start employed community college student. I also introduce the methodological literature.

The literature review is divided into three parts. The first part identifies the theoretical perspective of the study and connects it to the research paradigm. In part two, I use various research-reports and data related to community college students and degree completion to provide the context for the study. Helping frame the study, this part of the review also includes a discussion of three areas commonly identified in the literature as affecting the success of adult learners: engagement, motivation and self-belief. The final part introduces the phenomenological method and provides a review of studies using qualitative and phenomenological methodology.

Theoretical Perspective and Research Paradigm

The theoretical perspective is the point of view or lens through which research is conducted and data analyzed (Kilbourn, 2006). As Casanave and Li (2015) described, a theory is "our sense of how some aspect of the world works" (p. 3). Rather than being confined in our approach and interpretation to the parameters of the data, a theoretical perspective allows the researcher to view the study through abstract concepts and helps make visible the researcher's assumptions (Casanave & Li, 2015). This study utilizes a constructivist theoretical perspective, with the primary assumption being that we can understand, as Schwandt (1998) explained, the "complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who lived it" (p. 221). Further, a phenomenological paradigm is utilized due to its capacity to illuminate lived experience. Specifically, the study is most influenced by hermeneutic phenomenology because it attempts to construct an interpretive description of a lived experience, while recognizing it is always more complex than this process can reveal (van Manen, 1997).

The constructed experiences of the adult learner, in this case, the Head Start employed community college student, is what this study seeks to understand. For example, what did the participants experience as challenging, why do they believe they were successful in completing their degrees, what did they figure out about college and what did they know or come to know about themselves as learners? In other words, what did these learners construct about their experiences in a community college early childhood education degree program? Moreover, what understanding can I, as a

researcher and practitioner, construct about their experiences? Schwandt (1998) explained,

> constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as construct it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience and, further, we continually test and modify these constructions in light of new experience. (p. 237)

I approached the study guided by the idea that each participant constructed an understanding of their experience in community college early childhood education programs and that, together, we could construct further meaning and concepts about these experiences.

Constructivist Lens

Constructivism provides the theoretical lens through which this study is justified, planned, and conducted. This theory holds that cognitive structures are constructed in the mind of the learner (Philips & Soltis, 2009). The world is viewed as a human construction and knowledge as requiring interpretation by people (Kincheloe, 2008). Brooks and Brooks (1999) explained that constructivism is "a theory of learning that describes the central role that learners' ever transforming mental schemes play in their cognitive growth" (para. 2). Although referring specifically to children's learning, DeVries and Kohlberg (1987) offered the following helpful explanation of constructivism:

> These ideas must therefore come from the child-from his or her own effort to make sense out of experience. This is what Piaget meant when he said that the child constructs knowledge. When we take the trouble to find out how children actually think, we find that they learn-that is, construct-many things we do not teach. (p. 18)

According to Merriam et al. (2007), adults bring rich life experience to the educational setting, and this experience functions in their capacity to construct knowledge. They further explain that the experiences adults bring to their learning can be called upon as a resource for both themselves and others and used to integrate and transform meaning. Adults may find incentive for learning in their desire to make sense of their life experiences, but at the same time, these experiences may have created negative attitudes toward learning that will need to be unlearned (Merriam et al., 2007).

It is fairly common in education to find constructivism interpreted as a methodology rather than a theory, or perhaps even to find it narrowed down to specific models or activities. While the theory does inform practice, it is not simply a theory of teaching, but rather should be understood as a theory of learning, with the fundamental principles being that knowledge is constructed internally and that this construction is influenced by the previous learning and experience of the individual (Chaille, 2008). According to Brooks and Brooks (1999) the constructivist recognizes, "the search for meaning takes a different route for each student" (Constructivism in the Classroom, para. 2) and "students must attach relevance to the curriculum" (Constructivism in the Classroom, para. 4). The individual's constructed ideas can be uncovered and explored through phenomenological forms of inquiry (Schwandt, 1998).

Constructivism and Phenomenology. The constructivist view establishes the basic premise underlying this study—valuing the point of view of the learner in attempting to understand the educational experience (Creswell, 2005). For a constructivist researcher, "methods for data analysis are iterative, interactive,

hermeneutic, at times intuitive, and most certainly open" (Cypress, 2018, p. 306). As Merleau-Ponty (2012) explained, "phenomenology is an attempt to describe the basic structures of human experience and understanding from a first-person point of view, in contrast to the reflective, third person perspective that tend to dominate scientific knowledge and common sense" (p. vii). In referring to critical constructivism, Kincheloe (2008) pointed out that insight is gained by attending to experience and multiple perspectives and that "things-in-the-world often involve far more than what one notices at first glance" (p. 30). At its roots, phenomenology seeks essential understanding that comes from the individual's mental construct. As explained by Husserl (2017):

> It lies undoubtedly in the intrinsic nature of essential intuition that it should rest on what is the chief factor of individual intuition, namely the striving for this, the visible presence of individual fact, though it does not, to be sure, presuppose any apprehension of the individual or any recognition of its reality. Consequently it is certain that no essential intuition is possible without the free possibility of directing one's glance to an individual *counterpart* and of shaping an illustration: just as contrariwise no individual intuition is possible without the free possibility of carrying out an act of ideation and therein directing one's glance upon the corresponding essence which exemplifies itself in something individually visible. (p. 56)

For the phenomenological researcher, exploring one's consciousness is central to the concept that one must explore worldviews that are generally taken for granted, and a study conducted and interpreted from the constructivist view assumes that knowledge is not objective, nor does it exist separately from our minds (Kincheloe, 2008). Even knowledge that is considered objective is recognized by the constructivist to be part of a larger context of subjective thought and experience. As Kilbourn (2006) explained, "it is assumed that there is no such thing as a value-free or unbiased or correct interpretation of an event" (p. 545). Constructivists view knowledge or truth to be the result of perspective

and created rather than discovered (Schwandt, 1998). In this study, as with all phenomenological studies, the participants' descriptions are the data or evidence that will be analyzed. As Polkinghorne (2005) explained, "the evidence is the ideas and thoughts that have been expressed by the participants" (p. 138). It is critical that the researcher understand this and, as a result, listen objectively and attend to bias that could shift the focus from the participants' experience to the presuppositions of the researcher (Morgan, 2011). At the same time, it is recognized that the very nature of the inquiry leads to co-construction that cannot be fully disentangled (Schwandt, 1998).

Reflective Awareness. From my perspective, the entanglement of the constructivist view and phenomenological framework mentioned above allows the researcher to engage with the inquiry and the participants in manner that acknowledges and seeks awareness of preconceived ideas and bias. As Schwandt (1998) explained, the constructivist approach blends phenomenological interpretation and critical hermeneutics such that the researcher must attend to their own constructed ideas and the context of social constructs surrounding the research process. Orner's (1992) concern is that "we can never really know ourselves and others in any definitive way" (p. 84) and that there is both a possibility and actuality of "a gap, of misinterpretation, of misrecognition when we try to make sense of our relation to others" (p. 84) is, in essence, shared by the constructivist engaging in phenomenological research. S. R. Jones et al. (2006) identified multiple critical elements of phenomenology that illustrate this perspective. Specifically, they described the unique lived experience of the individual, the researcher's deep interest or concern for the phenomenon, a dynamic process and navigation between the

parts and the whole, and small numbers of participants as critical elements of phenomenological research.

While the goal of this study was to understand the participants' experiences in community college early childhood education programs from their own point of view, it is important to note here the critique of the expectation of student voice provided by Orner, (1992):

> Historically the demand by academics and other powerful groups for an "authentic" people's voice or culture to be heard has been received by disenfranchised groups with a great deal of suspicion. Why must the "oppressed" speak? For whose benefit do we/do they speak? How is speaking received, interpreted, controlled, limited, disciplined and stylized by the speakers, the listeners, the historical moment, the context? What use is made by the "people's voice" after it is heard? (p. 76)

This critique may be addressed in some measure through adopting the phenomenological stance.

In addition to the constructivist theoretical perspective and the phenomenological paradigm, the existing literature regarding the community college student population, community college degree completion, and student success provide context and framing for this study (Casanave & Li, 2015).

Review of the Community College Research Literature

In this section, I explore the literature regarding the characteristics of the community college student population, the value of community college to the student, and barriers and supports to degree completion. No specific studies were found regarding the Head Start employee as a community college student. However, in an effort to understand these students, and therefore determine the appropriate design for the study, the literature review examines the broader research regarding community college students

and other students who may face similar challenges and barriers to the Head Start employed student. The absence of literature regarding these students, and the small subset of literature regarding students with similar characteristics in the community college, also underscores the need for this study (Bickerstaff et al., 2017).

The Community College Student Population

Although anecdotal, E. Jones' (2007) description of community college students provides insight into this population as,

> those who didn't make it into the Ivy League or the state university . . . those who can't afford to leave home for a dorm . . . and those who went straight from high school into work and parenthood but now in their 30s and 40s and 50s are giving college another try (p. 128).

As described by Ma and Baum (2016):

> Community colleges play a crucial role in American higher education. Their open admission policy, coupled with low tuition and geographic proximity to home, makes them an important pathway to postsecondary education for many students, especially first-generation college students and those who are from low-income families, as well as adults returning to school to obtain additional training credentials. (p. 1)

At one time, a student was considered "non-traditional" if they were responsible for the care of another, employed more than 20 hours per week, over the age of 25, independent of their parents, or experienced a delay between completing high school and entering college (Belcastro & Purslow, 2006). Given that one or more of these characteristics are shared by a growing number of college students, these students are more appropriately referred to as adult learners (Osam et al., 2017).

Typically, community college students are more likely to be People of Color, women, older in age, and/or from lower income families than their counterparts at four-year colleges and universities (Horn & Nevill, 2006; Osam et al., 2017). They are also

more likely to have started postsecondary studies at age 20 or older and be employed full or part time (Fong et al., 2016; Ma & Baum, 2016). Community college students are also more likely to attend part time (Juszkiewicz, 2020). As of 2016, women have consistently made-up 55% of the community college student population (Beer, n.d.), which is similar to the percentage of women who make up the university student population (Marcus, 2017). However, more students at the community college may be single heads of households (Boggs, 2019). According to Bailey et al. (2015), a majority of entering community college students are not ready for college-level work given their college's measure. Adding to this challenge, community college students often face financial challenges and responsibilities for work and family along with their academic work (Eddy, 2010). It should be noted, that in a variety of ways, the underrepresented populations that make up the community college student body have been marginalized by sanctioned discrimination and policies that have denied them access to equitable opportunities and resources before arriving at the community college (Edgecombe, 2019).

Community College Degree Completion

In today's economy, a postsecondary degree is often seen as the critical link to economic security and employability (Frey, 2007). Students experience economic benefits from increased earning potential as the result of a community college education (Dadgar & Weiss, 2012; Goho & Blackman, 2004; Juszkiewicz, 2020). An extensive analysis by Belfield and Bailey (2017) found associate degrees consistently yield positive economic returns. Further, Kim and Tamborini (2019) found the 20-year cumulative earnings from an associate degree to be even more advantageous for women. Beyond

wages, Bailey et al. (2015) reported increased health returns associated with higher education.

Adults return to community college to gain work-related training (Ma & Baum, 2016), for personal enrichment, to earn an associate degree or to prepare to transfer to a university (Frey, 2007). Head Start employed students who seek their associate degree in early childhood education at the community college do so not only out of a desire to increase job skills and earning potential, but they may also be mandated to enroll in a college program in order to continue employment. When a Head Start employed student earns their degree, the benefits extend beyond that individual to the children they work with over the course of their career. Barnett (2003) reported that "better-educated teachers have more positive, sensitive and responsive interaction with children, provide richer language and cognitive experiences and are less authoritarian, punitive and detached" (p. 4). In one study examining how community college coursework affected teacher beliefs and classroom practices, Cassidy et al. (1995) found significant gains on two key rating scales. In the widely publicized *Eager to Learn* report, Bowman et al. (2001), concluded:

> . . . on the basis of evidence from the research on program quality combined with the research on teacher education, that a college degree with specialized education in child development and the education of young children ought to be required for teachers of young children. (p. 271)

Interestingly, even in the report of a major study that found no convincing relationship between teacher education and classroom quality or children's academic gains, the authors caution careful interpretation of the results and assert their belief that education should matter for teachers (Early et al., 2007).

Despite these compelling reasons to return to college, the majority of students do not complete degrees. In fact, fewer than four in 10 may complete degrees within six years (Bailey et al., 2015). However, some, like the Head Start employed students in this study, do achieve degrees. The literature indicates that there are both internal and external factors that play a role in degree completion. First, despite facing significant barriers, adult learners are motivated to achieve their degrees and may possess or develop certain characteristics and supports that help them do so (Bailey, Calcagno et al., 2005; Booth et al., 2013; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). In addition, the research indicates that there may be certain institutional characteristics and classroom strategies that support degree completion (Evans et al., 2017; Wyner, 2014), about which I go into greater detail later in the review.

Barriers to Degree Completion. Community college students differ from their counterparts at four-year institutions and face more barriers to completion (Bailey, Jenkins et al., 2005; Bragg et al., 2006; Ozaki 2016). Spellman's (2007) literature review explored the multitude of barriers faced by adult college students, explaining that, "Adults interested in pursuing training, certificates, or degree programs often confront a variety of barriers such as lack of academic preparation, lack of finances, social issues, cultural issues and overwhelming family responsibilities" (p. 63). Further, Spellman found that adults face conflicting priorities that interfere with educational activities due to life roles such as parent, spouse, or employee and that clash with expectations of college programs. The literature revealed that adults bring self-perceptions regarding ability to succeed and, due to lack of academic preparation or time away from formal education,

may not be academically prepared. Lastly, the review found that adults face financial barriers such as paying for tuition and textbooks and social and cultural barriers such as completing courses in a language that is not their primary language or difficulty integrating with peers.

Osam et al.'s (2017) literature review of barriers affecting adult learners revealed situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. Situational barriers included the work and family responsibilities adult students face, including many financial responsibilities and constraints. Institutional barriers that adult students encounter included policies and procedures that create logistical challenges, such as times when courses are offered and add to the stress of the experience of returning to college. Dispositional barriers are those that are specific, although likely not unique, to the individual learner, and include fear of failure, challenges adapting, and unease or lack of confidence in the educational setting. Multiple studies reveal the common barriers faced by adults include being less prepared, enrolled part time, lower socio-economic status, full time employment, and families to support (Beck & Biggs, 2008; Evans et al., 2017; Jenkins et al., 2006).

These life factors and external commitments create challenges for students such as paying for tuition, scheduling of classes, the ability to be on campus when offices are open and a lack of familiarity with systems (Belcastro & Purslow, 2006; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Ozaki, 2016). One study using a survey administered to 300 students at six different colleges found that the predominant challenges faced by community college students fit into three categories: academic success, balancing academics and personal life, and paying for tuition (M. T. Miller et al., 2005). Another study of 4,200 students at

one community college used both quantitative and qualitative approaches and found students reported cost, motivation, work and family obligations, class scheduling, reality versus expectations, institutional procedures, and issues related to caring for dependents as reasons for attrition (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016).

The findings of these studies and reviews, make clear that institutions and educators need to respond to the needs of students who may not be 18- to 22-years old and attending full time, as they are the new majority population in postsecondary education (Belcastro & Purslow, 2006; Osam et al., 2017). If students have a strong academic history, parents who attended college, enter college immediately following high school and attend full time and uninterrupted, their chances for success are more likely (Bailey, Jenkins et al., 2005). Unfortunately, these are often the very factors that are challenges for today's student. In attempts to address these barriers, community colleges may offer programs and resources to help with things like transportation and childcare (Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2006; Lutes, 2010; Selingo, n.d.) or attempt to improve preparedness through new approaches to remedial education (Wyner, 2014). However, community colleges continue to be tasked with, and challenged by, improving their effectiveness and outcomes for all students (Dougherty et al., 2014; Gellman-Danley & Martin, 2019). While there is not significant difference in course performance based on age, there are differences in the way that adults process information, their interest in coursework, and whether they accurately assess their abilities (Justice & Dornan, 2001). In order to help adult learners successfully complete courses and persist toward a degree, institutions must be aware of the learning and service needs of these

students (Belcastro & Purslow, 2006; Chaves, 2006; Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018; Wyman, 2014).

Head Start Employed Student. The Head Start employed student population shares the diverse characteristics of the larger community college student population. E. Jones (2007) described the students in a hypothetical community college early childhood course, pointing out that many are parents, some speak English as a second language, and they may be there as a condition of employment or promotion. Jones further noted that they could be preoccupied and anxious and tired from the work of caring for the community's children. The Head Start employed student is likely female. Nationally, the Head Start staff working directly with children is racially and ethnically diverse. The non-supervisory child development staff, according to the Office of Head Start (2019) designations, are 51% White non-Hispanic, 27% Black or African American, 2.6% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 2% Asian, and 0.5% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Additionally, 30% are of Hispanic or Latino origin, regardless of race. According to this same report, approximately 30% are proficient in a language other than English.

Due to their full-time employment status and life circumstances, the Head Start employed students may find completing a college degree challenging. These students work full or part-time as teachers, teacher assistants, bus drivers, cooks and other support staff. By the time they arrive in a community college classroom, they may have taken their own children to school, ridden the bus at their site, worked in a preschool classroom, completed a home visit or parent conference and attempted to do homework on their

lunch break. Lack of time or opportunity to take the required courses, family responsibilities and lack of confidence or ability in completing college level coursework are barriers to degree completion for many community college students (Osam et al., 2017; Spellman, 2007) and may be some of the barriers faced by Head Start employed students.

A multi-year study by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, that followed six cohorts of students who began pursuing their Bachelor of Arts degrees while already in the childcare workforce, found that students identified multiple challenges during their first year (Whitebook et al., 2010). Similar to the challenges faced by adult learners in the community college, these students struggled to balance school, work and family life and with academic and study skills, particularly academic writing. For those whose heritage language was not English, completing courses in English posed a challenge. Additionally, these students identified the financial support they were receiving as valuable. These findings affirm research that students faced with personal and financial challenges, when compared to students who have a higher level of preparedness and resources, were less likely to succeed (Bailey, Calcagno et al., 2005). Head Start employed students share many of these characteristics, and, as such, likely face multiple barriers to degree completion. Community colleges across the county are working to determine how to support students and improve their likelihood of graduation with a degree.

Student Success

This study does not seek to prove (or disprove) the efficacy of a particular program or approach, but rather to understand the experiences of the Head Start employed student in community college early childhood education programs from which they graduated. As Adams and van Manen (2017) explained,

> A unique feature of phenomenology is that it sets out to articulate and evoke dimensions of lived meaning by constantly pushing off the temptation to theorize, categorize, and abstract. It does this by orienting to life as we experience it, rather than as we conceptualize it . . . (p. 781)

At the same time, some framework may be needed to guide the development of a study, particularly the phenomenological interviews and their subsequent analysis. According to Morgan (2011):

> The researcher may let the relevant context emerge through his or her study and undertake the literature review in preparation of writing the research report *or* the researcher may tentatively situate the study from the beginning of the project within a particular context. (p. 48)

In an effort to respect the research question and the openness of the phenomenological approach (Dowling, 2007), this study utilizes the wide-ranging, yet predominant, notion of *student success* to provide this framework.

Understanding Community College Student Success. In the community college literature, the term student success is used to address a variety of initiatives and potential outcomes related to the students' experience. Key institutional measures of student success include retention, transfer and completion rates, and program management (Jenkins et al., 2006; Kanter & Armstrong, 2019). Examples of institutional student success initiatives might include proactive support services, coherent pathways to completion, or college success courses (Jenkins et al., 2006; McClenney, 2019). A classroom practice, such as supporting academically unprepared students, may also be

considered a student success initiative (Jenkins et al., 2006; Wyner, 2014). Research studies may look at student success by studying a specific modality such as online learning (Muse, 2003) or a particular group of students, such as women (Maddox, 2006). Additionally, individual student characteristics and psychosocial factors are considered in the literature (Fong et al., 2016). Although there are a variety of ways to define success at the community college, graduation with a degree is the critical measure. Graduation rates are not only a common outcome measured by government and legislative bodies, but completion of a certificate or degree opens the door students to enjoying the benefits of a community college education (Bailey et al., 2015; Dadgar & Weiss, 2012; Kane & Rouse, 1999).

Institutional Characteristics. Although the institutional effectiveness of community colleges has not been the subject of rigorous research to the same extent as four-year, residential colleges, the last two decades have produced a growing body of literature and seen an expanding investment in community college reform initiatives (Jenkins et al., 2006, 2015; O'Banion, 2019). As a result, a variety of factors are emerging that have been shown to impact student success. Bailey, Calcango et al. (2005) found that institutional factors such as size and number of faculty teaching part time could all have negative impact on students. Belcastro and Purslow (2006) presented an integrative framework illustrating that support of adult learners in postsecondary institutions had three main components: foundational needs, relationships, and relevance.

Using transcript data for 150,000 Florida community college students, Jenkins et al. (2006) found that there are certain policies and practices that can benefit all

students, and specifically underrepresented students, if they are well aligned across departments. Based on these findings, they recommended that institutions expand their focus on enrollment to include retention, proactively provide supports to students, experiment with ways to improve success, and use data to improve programs. As part of a multi-year study using data from colleges, faculty, and students, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) (2012) reported that collaborative work across departments is critical and identified seven design principles for community colleges to consider when implementing programs and practices. These practices are:

1. Focusing on a strong start through early contact and first year programs.
2. Developing clear pathways that help students navigate college systems.
3. Integrating support into coursework, rather than referring students out to services.
4. Setting high standards and offering corresponding support in helping students achieve them.
5. Making engagement "inescapable" for students.
6. Committing time and resources to bringing programs to scale.
7. Offering professional development to staff, faculty and administrators.

In their widely cited text *Redesigning Community Colleges*, Bailey et al. (2015) focused on a guided pathways model that is being implemented at colleges across the country. This model includes key components such as structuring course offerings and student choices, robust orientation and advising, and services and supports to help keep students on track. Edgecombe (2019, p. 219) recommended institutional leaders adopt four principles in order to serve their increasingly diverse population of students:

1. Know your students.
2. Understand obstacles to their success.
3. Adopt and adapt responsive policy and practice.
4. Scale and institutionalize continuous improvement.

In looking across these reports, it is evident that despite the challenges both community colleges and their students face, there are interventions and approaches that can positively influence students, and more specifically affect their completion of degrees. As Walsh and Milliron (2019) explained, increasing student success requires "bringing access, learning, and completion together" (p. 55). I discuss in more depth the role of institutions and faculty in expanding student success in the next section.

Engagement with the Institution. As educational researchers have sought to understand how to improve student success, how students engage with the institution has emerged as a key factor (Chaves, 2006; Zepke & Leach, 2010). The conditions that affect engagement can range from individual student background and motivation, to the relationship between student and educator, to the policies and practices of the institution. Adult students are generally enrolled in college part time, employed full-time, and responsible for supporting themselves and others, making engagement even more challenging (Frey, 2007). Piloting the Adult Learning Assessment Tool Kit, which included surveys of students at 25 community colleges, Frey (2007) reported that that it may be difficult for adults to travel to campus or utilize services in person, due to their responsibilities outside of college. In their study of White/non-Hispanic, first-generation community college students, Moschetti and Hudley (2015) found that these students may be more likely to focus on personal responsibility than the engagement of social networks

for support. Colleges and universities are beginning to see that they have a role in connecting the student to the campus community and helping them develop the knowledge and skills to be successful (Bailey et al., 2015; Belcastro & Purslow, 2006). Karp (2016), in reviewing non-academic supports, also found emerging evidence that helping students understand college and addressing their self-perceptions can improve outcomes. Further, Bailey (2018) indicated that colleges must partner with the public sector and local organizations to help address student material and financial needs outside of college.

The literature shows that community colleges must take an active role in the success of their students. One survey of 900 California community colleges, found key factors in student persistence from semester to semester included "having earned good grades, being able to register for the classes they need, and having the money to pay for college" (Booth et al., 2013, p. 16); all factors that are tied to the actions and policies of the institution. In their extensive review of the literature, Zepke and Leach (2010) identified four research perspectives related to student engagement and the associated assumptions. The common research perspectives included motivation and agency, transactional engagement, institutional support, and the value of active citizenship. Specifically, they found engaged students are intrinsically motivated and want to exercise their agency, ideally students and teachers engage with each other, intuitions can provide an environment conducive to learning, and institutions should work with students to enable challenges to social beliefs and practices.

Evans et al. (2017) found that an intensive case-management program implemented at a specific college was effective in increasing persistence, especially for female students. Stewart et al. (2015) recommended that "college administrators and academic/student affairs officers should ensure that special population groups continue to have access and are encouraged to utilize the cultural and social support, advising, and counseling programs to foster student success and increase student persistence" (p. 18). In addition to institutional activities, there are calls for more attention to the role of faculty in engaging community college students (Piland & Piland, 2020).

Engagement in the Classroom. One way to increase student engagement is through a sense of involvement in the classroom. Chen (2017) explained that students "must be encouraged to adopt self-direction to take educational initiative" (p. 8). Experiential models can allow adult learners to connect their real-world experience with concepts they are learning (Chaves, 2006). Head Start employed students will have examples, scenarios and questions that create the opportunity to situate a topic in the real world. They will have insights and experiences that instructors can leverage to address abstract concepts and learning objectives and respond to their interest in deeper comprehension (Chavez, 2006; Justice & Dornan, 2001). Piland and Piland (2020) recommended that faculty use students' names and get to know students by meeting with them individually. While adults come to the community college classroom with different backgrounds and experiences, there may be some commonalities that can provide perspective for faculty. Briefly summarized, Merriam et al. (2007) identified that adult learners are in the process of maturing to self-directing human beings, have accumulated

experience that can be used as a resource for learning, have varying degrees of readiness based on their social roles, and may bring a problem centered perspective and a desire to know why they are learning. They further explained that internal motivators are the most compelling for adults.

Knowles (1973) illuminated that, “We have finally begun to absorb into our culture the ancient insight that the heart of education is learning, not teaching, and so our focus has started to shift from what the teacher does to what happens to the learners” (p. 41). And that “as an individual matures, [their] need and capacity to be self-directing, to utilize [their] experience in learning, to identify [their]own readiness to learn, and to organize [their] learning around life problems increases steadily” (p. 43).

Applying Knowles’ (1973) theory to the Head Start employed community college student illustrates the opportunity faculty have to engage or alienate these students. According to Knowles, adult students need the opportunity to be self-directed, and if adults perceive they are undervalued or being treated like children, their learning will be negatively impacted. Head Start employed students have accumulated experience in the field working with children in classrooms or support roles. If this experience is ignored or undervalued by faculty, “the adult perceives this as not rejecting just [their] experience, but rejecting [them] as a person” (p. 46). Given this conclusion, it is important to recognize that this life experience should be valued, as should the possible sense of risk involved for the student in sharing their experience.

The Head Start employed student may be in the learning environment because they are mandated to take classes, motivated to attend on their own, or both. As such,

their learning may need to be stimulated "through exposure to better models of performance, higher levels of aspiration and self-diagnostic procedures" (Knowles, 1973 p. 47). In other words, the faculty member can engage the student in thinking about their current practice and ways that they want to change or improve it. Lastly, the Head Start employed student would very likely be in a position to begin applying their learning. Centering their learning on their real-life work problems can increase involvement (Knowles, 1973). An assistant teacher can begin use the information they are learning right away with children. A kitchen staff member may use what they learn in an early childhood course to change how they organize food or utensils for delivery to classrooms. A bus driver may start to use the new information when they talk to children about safety. Faculty can capitalize on these experiences engage the adult in learning.

According to Ferguson (2005),

> To help learners construct the knowledge and skills necessary for entry into a specific industry the constructivist facilitator must provide conditions that replicate or model the complexity and ambiguity of real-world concepts and problem-solving methods used by experts within industry. (p. 4)

Head Start employed students are often already familiar with the context of the early childhood classroom and therefore, well positioned to co-construct the learning. E. Jones (2007) advised that many adults in early childhood education programs are already in some way experts in the field, noting that they bring life experience and expertise different from that of faculty. She explained,

> They already know a lot about child development and education . . . Most of them have also been or now are baby sitters, parents, family child care providers, or teachers—grown-ups with responsibility for children's well-being. Their behavior with children is guided by the theories that they have been exposed to and have constructed intuitively for themselves. They know a lot. If you pretend they don't and concentrate on telling them what you know, that's both disrespectful and

> inefficient . . . To learn, your students need to think about and name what they already know, within the context of discovering what their peers do and know. (p. 2)

Certainly, this is true for the Head Start employed student who is working with children every day in a complex setting among a variety of peers with varying levels of experience and education. As Piland and Piland (2020) explained, adult learners will benefit from faculty validating prior learning and from opportunities to demonstrate learning in multiple ways. In addition to bearing in mind and leveraging adult learners' constructed experience, it is important to consider their motivation.

Motivation. Adult students' motivations are "many, complex, and subject to change" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 65). However, employment related factors are the most commonly cited by adult learners. As Merriam et al. (2007) explained in *Learning in Adulthood:*

> Hundreds of local, state, and national studies have asked adults their reasons for engaging in educational pursuits. In most of these studies, respondents are presented with a list of reasons why people might participate in organized learning activities and asked to indicate which ones apply to them, most respondents report multiple reasons. If asked to indicate the *main* reason (as they were in NCES surveys), however, they most commonly cite job-related motives. (p. 62)

Chaves (2006) explained that students come to college with diverse backgrounds, different levels of preparedness, and different levels of commitment to academic success. For historically underrepresented populations, this may include internalization of prior discriminatory practices (Chen, 2017). As a result of their background, students are motivated differently, and both intrinsic and extrinsic factors might motivate learning (Brewer & Burgess, 2005). Students whose motivation is more intrinsic or self-authored, will have increased performance, creativity, and persistence and the most valuable

learning (Brewer & Burgess, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These students enjoy the learning and sense of accomplishment it brings (Brewer & Burgess, 2005).

Intrinsic motivation can be fostered by instructors' use of innovative methods that involve hands-on work and through showing interest in students and attention to their needs (Harris, 2011). Students who are not yet attuned to intrinsic factors of motivation may feel motivated by external factors such as grades, praise from instructors (Harris, 2011) and workplace factors such as economic reasons or professional advancement. As mentioned previously in this chapter, Head Start employed students are generally older than what was just 20 years ago considered the traditional age college student. Older students tend to be more motivated to attend college for intrinsic reasons (Justice & Dornan, 2001). Further, adult learners may find their lack understanding a concept and desire to learn it motivating, however, feeling frustrated with teachers and the curriculum could undermine adults' motivation (Rowe & Fitness, 2018).

Self-Belief. The beliefs and characteristics students have when they arrive at the community college impact their success. Van Dinther et al. (2011), explained that the beliefs students hold about themselves, or their sense of self-efficacy, affect them as learners. When faced with a difficult task, individuals with a low sense of self-efficacy may feel helpless, tense and depressed, while those with a high sense of self-efficacy will feel challenged, yet unintimidated (Semmar, 2006; Van Dinther et al., 2011). Interestingly, this sense of self-efficacy may reinforce itself as students have successful experiences in college or serve as an immunity when they are not successful (Semmar, 2006).

In their review of the literature regarding student engagement, Zepke and Leach (2010) found students' self-belief to be linked to their motivation. Specifically, they found that students with a fixed self-theory regarding their abilities tended to lose motivation when goals were not achieved. However, if the learners' self-theory was more malleable they tended to see challenges as opportunities and stay engaged independently of their performance. As Moschetti and Hudley (2015) found some first-generation college students may not seek available support due to their focus on personal responsibility. L. A. Tovar (2008) pointed out that adult students may not be cognizant of their own learning, and even added this barrier to the traditional list of geographic, family and financial issues. Rowe and Fitness (2018) found that faculty play a key role in how students view themselves.

> A number of strategies were offered by participants to reduce the onset of negative emotions, most of which fell within the responsibility of teaching staff. They included the use of humor and other teaching methods to foster interest in the classroom (particularly when the content was considered "boring"), showing care and concern, encouraging students to form connections with peers and seek assistance in times of stress, providing frequent and timely feedback to reduce anxiety and confusion, being available to students, providing clear instructions and dispersing assessment tasks throughout the semester to prevent student overload. (p. 15)

Ferguson (2005) explained, learners develop constructs based upon their worldview and prior experience and the instructor. Hoggan and Browning (2019) recommended support and encouragement that builds upon strengths, while acknowledging challenges, helping learners develop a "new narrative as capable learners who can rise to meet challenges, learn from experiences, and change the old narratives" (p. 34). One area in which adult learners may have previous experience and self-perceptions is online learning.

Student Experience in Online Courses. It is a commonly held belief that online courses offer a flexible option for students, such as the Head Start employed student, who have time constraints, job conflicts and multiple responsibilities (Yen & Liu, 2009). While online courses can increase access for working students, they can pose other challenges. According to Huang (2002), "adult learners usually have strong self-direction in learning, so they are actively participating learners" (p. 31) and in the online environment, "some learning takes place beyond the instructor's scope, for example in discussions and in collaboration with peer learners" (p. 31). This could be advantageous for adult learners. However, students' beliefs about themselves as learners may affect their performance in these classes. As it has evolved as a learning modality in postsecondary education, studies have looked at the student characteristics that contribute to a success in online courses.

A study by Yen and Liu (2009) found that learner autonomy, which they define as the "characteristic of an individual who exhibited intentional behavior in learning activities" (p. 347), was a predictor of course success and final grades in online courses. Muse (2003) also explained that students rely on their self-confidence based upon past experiences to help them succeed in online courses. Unfortunately, students may not come to the online, or college, learning experience with this confidence. As Walker (2017) explained:

> Adults come with so much shame to learning: We are much more risk averse than children, having had years of (often unprocessed) shame experiences. Adult learners, especially nontraditional students or those in adult basic education are often in educational shame recovery. (p. 12)

Although online learning has rapidly expanded, and in the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis has become the only available learning option for many community college students, these studies illustrate that not all learners come to the online learning environment with equal levels of preparedness and confidence (Kelly & Zakrajsek, 2021). According to Kelly and Zakrajsek (2021), "differences among our students demand that we consider a wide variety of educational experiences that map onto vastly different student characteristics" (p. 7), noting the most effective approaches require faculty to be highly engaged in assessing student learning and incorporating approaches that respond to diverse perspectives and learning styles into their online courses. Beyond online learning, students' perceptions of themselves as learners will likely permeate all aspects of their experience.

Student View. According to Harlow and Cummings (2003), students come to community college with different expectations, mindsets and backgrounds, and three resulting relation patterns. The first of these is the *survivor*. This student is the least mature, the least open, and is focused on just getting through. This student may simply not be ready for college or may have other responsibilities and distractions. The second type of student they describe is the *adjustor*. These students figure out expectations and achieve them, however, learning is primarily seen as a means to an end, and the instructor as the authority figure. The third type of learner is the *encounterer*. Operating with a maturity that may or may not be related to age, they exhibit autonomy, independence and curiosity in their learning. Houle, whose typography of students identified them as goal

oriented, activity oriented or learning oriented, proposed a similar view (Merriam et al., 2007).

Bain (2004) provided insight regarding how faculty influence the success of students:

> Highly effective teachers tend to reflect a strong trust in students. They usually believe that students want to learn, and they assume, until proven otherwise, that they can. They often display openness with students and may, from time to time, talk about that their own intellectual journey, its ambitions, triumphs, frustrations, and failures, and encourage their students to be similarly reflective and candid. They may discuss how they developed their interests, the major obstacles they have faced in mastering the subject, to some of their secrets for learning particular material. They often discuss openly and enthusiastically their own sense of awe and curiosity about life. Above all, they tend to treat students with what can only be called simple decency. (p. 18)

While understanding student backgrounds and approaches may provide community college faculty with a better understanding of their needs, the manner in which institutions and faculty classify students may reflect their preferred outcomes and may not encompass adult learners' complex needs and identities (Levin et al., 2016). Booth et al. (2007) found that community college students cite nurturing friends, classmates, family members, counselors, staff, and faculty as sources of support, with 57% citing family and 32% citing faculty as key to their success. Additionally, 94% indicated their instructors caring about them was somewhat or very important. E. Jones (2007) stated, "Our role as college instructors isn't to screen people out of the early childhood profession. Our role is to invite them in, discovering and building on their strengths" (p. 129). Chen (2017) explained personalization, in terms of both meaning and utility, of the learning is important when teaching adults.

Despite the emerging knowledge of the barriers adult students face and the body of research regarding adult learners, less than half of those who attend community college graduate (Bailey et al., 2015). Perhaps, as Brookfield (1995) espoused:

> Blithe generalizations about the "adult learner", "adults as learners" or the "nature of adult learning" imply that people over 25 form a homogenous entity simply by virtue of their chronological age. Yet the differences of class, culture, ethnicity, personality, cognitive style, learning patterns, life experiences and gender among adults are far more significant than the fact that they are not children or adolescents. We need to be much more circumspect when talking about adults as if they were an empirically coherent entity simply by virtue of the fact that they are no longer in school. In particular, we need to challenge the ethnocentrism of much theorizing in their area which assumes that adult learning as a generic phenomenon or process is synonymous with the learning undertaken in university continuing education classes by white middle class adults in the post war era. (p. 8)

Further, Brookfield asserted, this understanding should lead us to engage in "more phenomenographic studies of how adults feel their way through learning episodes, given in their own words and using their own interpretations and constructs, would enrich our understanding of the significance of learning to adults" (p. 8). Indeed, my review of the literature indicates a need to look more closely at the experiences of community college students, and the Head Start employed student in particular, to better understand their experiences in this context.

Summary

My review of the literature has revealed community colleges, as institutions, should recognize the significant challenges their students face and implement student success initiatives that can respond to their unique needs (Edgecombe, 2019). Specifically, adult learners will be challenged by their unique life circumstances and responsibilities. Effective institutional responses include proactive and integrated support,

clear advising and pathways, development of faculty and staff, and large-scale dedication of resources (Bailey et al., 2015; CCCSE, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2006).

The Head Start employed student will come to the community college with an existing, yet malleable, sense of themselves as a learner (Zepke & Leach, 2010). The rich life experience of these students, as adults already working in the profession, can be called upon by both the student and the instructor to construct and co-co-construct a deep understanding of the material (Ferguson, 2005; Merriam et al., 2007). At the same time, these adult learners come to the experience with different levels of preparedness and confidence (Chaves, 2006; Van Dinther, 2011). The skilled instructor can foster a sense of efficacy and intrinsic motivation by valuing these students' prior experiences (Knowles, 1973) and creating engaging learning opportunities that reflect their interest in the student (Harris, 2011). Given that Head Start employees reflect the demographics of the larger body of community college students, and are also more likely to reflect the culture and language of the children enrolled in Head Start, adding their voice to the literature is of particular importance. A phenomenological approach can effectively provide insight into how these students perceive their own experience (Brookfield, 1995).

Review of Methodological Literature

There is a long history of quantitative studies that count occurrences of something or seek to repeat an event to verify its truth. As Husserl (2017) posited:

> From the viewpoint of *practical knowledge*, also, we might expect in advance that the more an empirical science approximates to the "rational" stage, the stage of "exact" nomological science, i.e., the greater the extent to which its structure is ordered on the basis of well-developed eidetic disciplines, and to its own advantage draws upon them for the grounding of its own propositions, the greater

> will be the increase in the scope and power of those practical services which are the fruits of knowledge. (p. 65)

In contrast, "Phenomenology does not allow for empirical generalizations, the prediction of law-like statements, or the establishment of functional relationships" (van Manen, 1997, p. 22). Surely, as Husserl asserted, "definition cannot take the same form in philosophy as it does in mathematics; the imitation of mathematical procedure is invariably in this respect not only unfruitful, but perverse and most harmful in its consequences" (p. 47). Gadamer (1989) referred to the "new dimension of research" (p. 246) involving a highly differentiated theme of transcendental reflection and explained, "the flow of experience has the character of a universal horizon consciousness, and only from it is the discrete experience given as an experience at all" (p. 247). More specifically to early childhood education, Iorio and Parnell (2016) explained that "democratizing the research process, and viewing critical issues in early childhood from new perspectives contribute to how research can be thought of outside reductionist approaches" (p. 5). In the following section, I describe phenomenology, a qualitative methodology, and provide a brief history of the method and its complexities.

Phenomenology

Dahlberg (2006) noted, "In our everyday lives, we do not problematize what we experience but take for granted that what we see is what it seems to be" (p. 15). However, the human science researcher seeks a deeper understanding of the human experience. Human science research seeks ". . . insight into the essences of things" (Husserl, 2017, p. 58). As Morgan (2011) described, the phenomenological method:

> does not seek to test scientific theories or evaluate the efficacy of a drug on a particular population. Instead, it encourages people to make sense of experiences

> as these develop in the course of daily life, without being coerced by constraints imposed by the particular methods used to study such experiences. (p. xiiv)

As van Manen (1997) explained, "phenomenological research consists of reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life" (p. 32). Indeed, "Phenomena may preferably be appreciated as essences and describing phenomena and their essences is a common methodological goal in phenomenological research" (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 1).

Some accounts of phenomenology extol a very clear delineation between the different traditions and seek to identify a defined procedure that constitutes the method. A deeper examination reveals that perhaps the methodology is not so pre-determined. "We shall maintain that phenomenology is not just one philosophical science among others, nor is it the science preparatory to the rest of them; rather, *the expression 'phenomenology' is the name for the method of scientific philosophy in general*" (Heidegger, 1998, p. 3).

Husserl and Heidegger are credited respectively with descriptive and interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2009). While some seem to see a clear distinction, as a novice researcher, I found this clarity to be more elusive. I would agree with van Manen (1997) that "phenomenological human science is a form of research that is extremely demanding of its practitioners" (p. 33). Gadamer (1989) captures some of the complex of history of phenomenology:

> Under the rubric of a "hermeneutics of facticity," Heidegger confronted Husserl's eidetic phenomenology, as well as the distinction between fact and essence on which it depended, with a paradoxical demand. Phenomenology should be ontologically based on the facticity of Dasein, existence, which cannot be based on or derived from anything else, and not on the pure cogito as the essential

> constitution of typical universality—a bold idea, but difficult to carry through. (p. 255)

As Heidegger (1982) himself said, "within phenomenological inquiry there are again differing definitions of its nature and tasks" (p. 2).

Dowling's (2007) historical overview of the methodology traces the path from Husserl to van Manen, noting that while phenomenology has become an established research approach its evolution in recent decades may have shifted and lost sight of its philosophical origins. However, Dowling also included broad descriptions of the method that mirror those found throughout the literature:

> This involves the phenomenologist attempting to meet the phenomenon as free and as unprejudiced as possible in order that the phenomenon present itself as free and as unprejudiced way as possible so that it can be precisely described and understood. (p. 132)

Also consistent in the literature is a focus on our experiences (van Manen, 1997) through focus on the essences that make the phenomenon what it is (Dahlberg, 2006).

From my perspective, descriptive phenomenology attempts to capture the essence of the life-world of the phenomenon with no influence of prior understanding or presupposition (Dowling, 2007), while interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology attempts to describe the essence of lived experience (van Manen, 1997), but with the understanding, or at least acceptance, that the researcher always has some degree of prior understanding that influences their interpretation (Dowling, 2007). Gadamer (1989) explained that Heidegger:

> . . . was the first to unfold in its full radicality: that we study history only insofar as we are ourselves "historical" means that the historicity of human Dasein in its expectancy and its forgetting is the condition of our being able to re-present the past. What first seemed simply a barrier, according to the traditions concept of

> science and method, or a subjective condition of access to historical knowledge, now becomes the center of fundamental inquiry. (p. 262)

van Manen (1997) went so far as to say, "It is presumed that one comes to the human sciences with a prior interest, for example, a teacher, a nurse, or a psychologist" (p. 1). While Dahlberg (2006) stated, "essences are not something we as researchers explicitly add to the research. They are already there, in the intentional relationship between the phenomenon and us" (p. 12). Given that the goal of phenomenology is to make the unheard heard, we must approach the research with the idea of bracketing our presuppositions (Dahlberg, 2006). At the same time, I cannot argue with the notion of the hermeneutic stance of essential understanding or interpretation that includes the totality of the existential structure, even if the intention of the knower is simply to read what is there (Gadamer, 1989). According to Morgan (2011):

> Researchers who adopt this method usually collect personal accounts of some specific phenomenon in an attempt to describe the meaning this phenomenon holds for individuals. These studies are intended to complement rather than replace projects derived from other ways of knowing, primarily by conveying a sense of direct engagement with the phenomenon of interest. (p. xiiv)

In this study I engage directly with the phenomenon of Head Start employed students who completed their degrees in community college early childhood education programs. As Morgan (2011) described, in referencing phenomenological research, this research is intended to complement the existing body of community college student success knowledge.

Qualitative and Phenomenological Studies in the Literature

As already described above, phenomenological methodology is not a prescriptive science. For example, a 2016 study by Yuksel-Arslan et al., utilized a phenomenological

method, including individual interviews and a focus group, to study early childhood teacher practice. Bradbury-Jones et al. (2006) pointed out that some phenomenological researchers claim use of focus groups is not congruent with the method, however, they asserted that this method can provide a greater understanding of the phenomenon and the data is enriched "as a result of the participants reflecting on and hearing their experiences, and clarification and checking for understanding both among and between participants and researcher" (p. 667). The aforementioned early childhood teacher study included opportunities for participants to discuss their feelings and used narrative to determine the essence of the experience. This essence is at the heart of phenomenology. As van Manen (1997) explained, "phenomenological research . . . aims at elucidating those phenomenologically structural features of a phenomenon that help to make it visible, as it were, that which constitutes the nature of an essence of the phenomenon" (pp. 121-122). As we seek to understand how phenomenology can be employed to illuminate experience of Head Start employed teachers who completed their degrees in community college early childhood education programs, as illustrated below, there are studies in the literature of the student experience that are helpful to review.

Lived Experience of Community College Students. As phenomenological researchers, "we aim at the essences of the phenomena that are present in the lifeworld descriptions of any kind, for example interviews, or written narratives, focusing particular phenomena" (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 12). A review of the methodological literature revealed that phenomenological studies can effectively illuminate the lived experience of community college students. While this study has not been done before, similar

methodology has been used in qualitative studies having similar purposes or questions. Broadly, the studies reviewed used data collection methods and analysis similar to this study. In fact, a growing number of studies use a phenomenological approach to understand the experience of particular groups in higher education generally, and in the community college specifically.

Phelps (2005) utilized a phenomenological approach to study students' attendance and learning in community college developmental math courses. Through interviews with three students and two leaders of Supplemental Instruction, a Multiple Intelligence Inventory and statistical data, eight themes related to student motivation and nine themes regarding types of activities were identified. A reduction and analysis, credited to Creswell, of specific statements and themes by both individuals and the group was completed. The motivating factors the students experienced were both intrinsic and extrinsic.

In order to understand the experience of learners in the online setting, Donnelly and Kovacich (2014) conducted a phenomenological investigation of adult student attrition in community college online courses. The students had participated in online courses, but dropped an online course, and the goal of the study was to understand their individual experiences. Bambara et al. (2009) also examined the lived experience of community college students in high-risk online courses. The phenomenological methodology allowed them to determine if there was a shared common experience among participants and the opportunity to examine possible interrelated dimensions of the human experience. Data collection included in-depth interviews, lasting 60 to 90 minutes,

with 13 students. The researchers applied Moustakas's four-step process (epoch, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of composite textural and structural descriptions) to analyze the data.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of student perceptions in a community college history course Maypole and Davies (2001) first taught using constructivist theories and then completed interviews with 24 students and analyzed the students' essays. They contend that "Frequently educators postulate on teaching and learning theories but fail to ask students if classroom practices help or hinder their learning" (p. 57). They reported on 13 themes, primarily utilizing the students' own words.

Torraco (2008) examined student learning and experiences in nine occupational education programs to find out how students and supervisors perceived how prepared the students were to continue learning after graduation from these programs. The multiple case study design included interviews with 39 students and 10 supervisors to answer five research questions. The transcribed interviews ". . . were subjected to thematic content analysis using standard qualitative procedures" (p. 218). The methodology differed from the studies described above in that data, and therefore conclusions, were drawn from a variety of sources other than the participants.

Phenomenological methods have been selected by researchers seeking to illuminate the experiences of historically underserved populations including those from particular racial or ethnic groups. Wood and Turner (2010) used a qualitative methodology to examine the experience of African American males in the community college in order to identify factors that impacted their academic success. Interviews with

28 students revealed four key faculty-initiated elements. These elements were being friendly and caring from the onset, monitoring and proactively addressing students' academic progress, listening to students' concerns and encouraging students to succeed. They explained that "the intricate inter-relationships of these elements are discussed through the 'voices' and first-hand experiences of the student participants" (p. 135).

Olive (2014) conducted a study of first-generation Hispanic students in order to understand their experience of desire for higher education. The study focused on one particular group of students, and the phenomenological approach was selected due to its rigor and ability to foreground the lived experience of these students. Themes identified were the influence of respected others; resilience, persistence, and self-efficacy; self-denial in order to model educational values; a need for distinction and career satisfaction; spirituality and divine influence; altruistic motivation to professionally help others; and a view of commitment to a counseling degree as a nonlinear, but preferred process. McCoy (2014) utilized a phenomenological approach to understand first generation college students' of color transitions to a predominantly white institution. In order to focus on the participants' lived experiences, a phenomenological interview was combined with storytelling. One-hour interviews were conducted, which included a prompt for students to share stories, related to their experience selecting and transitioning to the institution.

The studies reviewed demonstrate that phenomenological methodology is an effective paradigm to describe the lived experiences of students. When given the opportunity to talk about their experiences, the students in these studies identified factors that influenced their learning and motivation. They also revealed information about their

interaction with the institution. The open-ended questions revealed themes that the researchers may have anticipated, but also themes that were unexpected.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Head Start employed students in the early childhood community college programs in which they earned their associate degrees and to determine challenges and factors in their success. The literature revealed a variety of factors that affect community college students, including institutional and student characteristics, which are commonly referred to as being related to student success.

While this study does not seek to prove the efficacy of a particular theory, the literature related to student success provided an effective guide or framework in the development of the study. Along with this framework, the constructivist theoretical perspective and phenomenological method selected for the study were discussed. In Chapter 3, I describe specifically how this phenomenological methodology was utilized to respond to the research purpose and questions.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

The Head Start program serves children and families living in poverty across the United States. In recent decades, the qualifications for teaching positions have shifted from no formal education requirements to the requirement of college degrees (Zigler, 2010). Community colleges, having long been the access point for a diverse group of students, were a logical place for the Head Stared employed students to seek associate degrees (Cavanagh et al., 2010; Dougherty et al., 2017). These students likely faced some of the same financial, academic and personal challenges that have been identified as barriers to degree completion for the community college student population (Evans et al., 2017; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

The purpose of this study was to describe and explore the experiences of Head Start employees who earned their associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs. A phenomenological methodology, described in this chapter, was utilized to understand the research question: How do individuals who completed their associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs, while employed in Head Start programs, perceive their experience and the sub-questions: What challenges or barriers do these individuals report and what factors do these students identify as contributing to their success?

Phenomenological Research Paradigm

Phenomenology seeks universal meaning and essence, making the lived experience explicit (van Manen, 1997). The focus of phenomenological design methodology is collecting data that provides “fresh, complex, rich descriptions of a

phenomenon as it is concretely lived" (Finlay, 2009, p. 6). The nature of the phenomenological design (Padilla-Diaz, 2015) is ideal for this particular study because it allows the Head Start employed students' experiences to emerge without being overshadowed by preconceived ideas of what did or did not impact the completion of their degrees (S. R. Jones et al., 2006). The use of self-reported information and qualitative analysis provides the opportunity to capture the lived experience of a particular group (Waters, 2013) and, as Wertz et al. (2011) explained, it is applicable to "research problems that require understanding and description of the essentials of lived experience" (p. 134).

Phenomenological studies examine human beings in human terms. "The aim is to construct an animating evocative description (text) of human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences as we meet them in the lifeworld" (van Manen, 1997, p. 19). This method relies heavily upon concrete descriptions of lived experience from first person accounts in everyday language and acknowledges the interconnectedness between the researcher and the phenomenon (Finlay, 2009; Wertz et al., 2011). The procedure in the phenomenological method assumes that the meaning in the human experience may not be immediately clear, but that through a disciplined dialogue, understanding evolves (Morgan, 2011). The value comes not from large surveys of unknown individuals, but from the personal experiences of unique individuals in specific situations (Morgan, 2011). This study places the Head Start employed students' own words in the foreground to illuminate their experience in community college early childhood education programs.

As with any qualitative study, the basic premise of the design rests on the idea that knowledge comes from the human experience that goes beyond quantitative instrumental measurement and statistics. At the same time, qualitative researchers must still be "careful, self-critical, methodical and accountable" (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 3). It is important to acknowledge, "a phenomenological description is always one interpretation, and no single interpretation will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary and even potentially *richer* or *deeper* description" (van Manen, 1997, p. 31). The following section provides a brief overview of the specific approach to the phenomenological method used in this study.

Overview of the Method

The research procedures used in the phenomenological method are intentionally not prescribed or narrowly focused on specific steps (Groenwald, 2004; Hycner, 1985; S. R. Jones et al., 2006). Husserl (2017) illuminated the experience of embarking upon the phenomenological journey:

> If this procedure in its unsophisticated form serves at first only to make one at home in a new domain, to practice seeing, apprehending, analyzing generally within it, and to encourage some acquaintance with its data, scientific reflexion upon the essential nature of the types of presentation which play their part within it, upon essence, performance, conditions of complete clearness and insight, as well as of completely true and steady conceptual expression, and more of the same kind, undertakes the function of a general and logically rigorous methodic grounding. (p. 191)

Wertz et al. (2011) explained that "Phenomenology is neither a doctrine nor a contrived method, but a diverse, living movement that is still changing" (p. 130). As van Manen (1997) stated, "the broad field of phenomenological scholarship can be considered a set of guides and recommendations for a principled form of inquiry" (p. 30). However, many

contend that there is some need to identify guidelines, particularly for the novice researcher (Groenwald, 2004; Mason, 2010; Morgan, 2011). Morgan (2011) explained, "there is no single path of investigative orthodoxy. Rather the backbone of the method is revealed in shared philosophical assumptions, requisite investigative steps, and core technical vocabulary emphasized in diverse projects" (p. xv).

Morgan's (2011) text *Investigating Our Experience in the World: A Primer on Qualitative Inquiry* focused "on methodological fundamentals . . . intended to help a new generation of scholars enter into doing a particular type of empirical, qualitative research" (p. ix). This text provided the basic procedures for this phenomenological study. In addition, philosophical and methodological direction from traditional and contemporary sources were considered in developing both the spirit of inquiry and the basic methodology of the study. Most notably, van Manen's (1997) *Researching Lived Experience* was utilized in determining specific research activities and ensuring a phenomenological stance. This stance, as explained by Morgan (2011), "involves a willingness to stay with uncertainty, to be curious, to keep looking for deeper understanding" (p. xiv). The major categories of activities Morgan outlined informed the framing of the project and initial bracketing, phenomenological interviewing, interpreting texts, thematizing and developing thematic structure, and writing the research report. A general description of how these categories were applied in this study is provided here and revisited in more detail later in this chapter. It should be noted that Morgan included procedures for a research team, a strategy that was not utilized in this study. Instead, I included a peer-debrief to strengthen the trustworthiness of the research.

Framing the Project and Initial Bracketing. The study was framed through a review of the literature and selection of the research methodology. As previously stated, a constructivist theoretical lens supported a phenomenological design methodology to describe and explore the responses of Head Start teachers to their experiences in the community college early childhood education programs in which they received their associate degrees. Literature was reviewed related to community college students, barriers to degree completion, and institutional and student characteristics that impact student success. A review of qualitative and phenomenological studies of community college students was also completed.

Phenomenological Interviews. In-depth interviews, followed by focus groups, were used to collect data in the form of the rich and full experiences of the Head Start employed students who earned their associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs (Polkinghorne, 2005). I utilized the key concepts that emerged in the literature to develop guiding questions for the interviews, but attempted to suspend the presuppositions they created. As Wimpenny and Gass (2000) explained, in developing the research questions the researcher has already developed a conceptual map of the phenomenon, which may limit the potential depth of the interview. Despite this, the researcher must suspend assumptions and biases (Laverty, 2003; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). The phenomenological researcher must avoid trying to confirm a presupposed idea, and instead focus on trying to "unearth something 'telling' something 'meaningful,' something 'thematic' in the various experiential accounts—we work at mining meaning

from them" (van Manen, 1997, p. 86). Bracketing, which is described in detail later in this chapter, helped me suspend judgment and beliefs about the phenomena (Laverty, 2003).

The phenomenological interview is designed to find out the participants' experience and awareness of the phenomena and what meaning, if any, it has for them (Morgan, 2011). In the study, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant "centered on eliciting the experience of the respondents" (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000, p. 1491). In many phenomenological studies, follow-up interviews are used to clarify of the data and for participants to provide further detail (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). In this study, the focus group served as the mechanism for this follow-up.

Interpreting the Text or Analysis. The third component of the research process described by Morgan (2011) is interpreting the texts or analyzing the parts and the whole and determining what stands out. At this stage, I read and listened to the transcripts, studying the words and phrases for general units of meaning (Hycner, 1985). These units are then clustered to form preliminary themes (Groenwald, 2004). According to Laverty (2003), "the primary aims are understanding and reconstruction of experience and knowledge" (p. 26). In considering the researcher's interpretation, van Manen (1997) warned, "the tendency to generalize may prevent us from developing understandings that remain focused on the uniqueness of the human experience" (p. 22). I focused on approaching this process with as much openness as possible (Hycner, 1985).

Thematizing and Developing Thematic Structure. Dahlberg (2006) explained, "phenomena may preferably be appreciated as essences, and describing phenomena and those essences is a common methodological goal in phenomenological research" (p. 11).

Thematizing is analyzing the participant accounts to determine what themes emerge and how to illustrate them (Morgan, 2011). I determined the general themes and reviewed them for relevance with the participants in focus groups (Morgan, 2011; Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Simon & Goes, n.d.). Ultimately, this produced the summary descriptions of the themes that illustrate the findings (Hycner, 1985; Polkinghorne, 2005).

Writing the Research Report. The final phase Morgan (2011) identified is writing the research report. In reporting the findings of the phenomenological interviews and analysis, the goal is a vivid understanding of the participants' experience. In order to do this, I focused on using the participants' own words in the report. van Manen (1997) provided the phenomenological researcher with this direction:

> Phenomenological text succeeds when it lets us see that which shines through, that which tends to hide itself . . . Phenomenological writing is not found in the colorful words of the storyteller, nor in the fanciful phrases of the person with flair for writing. The words are not the thing. And yet, it is to our words, language, which we must apply all our phenomenological skills and talents, because it is in and through the words that shining through (the invisible) becomes visible. (p. 130)

The report of the findings in this study consists of a presentation and analysis of the data and a discussion of the conclusions.

The rest of this chapter describes in detail how this methodology was utilized in the study. The following sections address the participants and settings, the data collection instruments, my role as a phenomenological researcher, and the analysis of the data.

Participants and Settings

While there are thousands of Head Start employees across the United States, the aim of this study, as has been previously mentioned, was to deeply understand the particular experiences of a small group of Head Start employees who completed their

associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs. In other words, the scope of the study was not intended to be wide, but instead aimed to be deep. Above all, participants needed to have experience with the phenomena and the willingness and ability to discuss it (Morgan, 2011).

Typically, phenomenological researchers do not articulate a sample size (Morgan, 2011), but samples consist of a small group able to communicate the lived experience (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Morse (1995) explained, "In qualitative research, there are no published guidelines or tests of adequacy for estimating the sample size required to reach saturation equivalent to those formulas used in quantitative research" (p. 147). However, there is debate as to what saturation is for a particular topic, and what is achieved by those who claim it. In a qualitative analysis of sample size and saturation in PhD studies, Mason (2010) found that overall sample sizes could range from one to 95, with a range for phenomenological studies from seven to 89 and a mean of 23. The focus is on reaching a saturation point, or the point at which participants are no longer providing new information (Mason, 2010; Morgan, 2011). Morse (2000) identified six to 10 participants as appropriate for phenomenological studies in which large amounts of data are collected for each participant. I began the study with the intention of including six to 10 participants. This number reflected both necessity of planning the scope of the project and the reality of available potential participants.

Recruiting Participants

Homogenous, or purposive sampling based on membership in a sub-group, was used to determine the study participants (Creswell, 2005; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). There are

five major Head Start programs in the community college district in which I work, which served as a starting place to recruit participants. These include the largest program in the district operated by a Community Action Agency, a multi-site rural county program, a school district program, a program for migrant families, and a Tribal Head Start program. I reached out people I believed would be connected to potential participants primarily via email (see Appendix A). I included Head Start program leads, education coordinators, community college and university faculty, and community organizations. These efforts led to the first two interviews. As I continued to expand my outreach across the geographic region, I conducted a third interview. I originally planned to attend in-person meetings at Head Start locations, based on Wells' (2015) approach to a study of Head Start teacher retention in which researchers visited "10 Head Start locations and asked each eligible teacher if they would like to participate" (p. 154). However, I was unable to pursue this avenue due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given this limitation, I continued to reach out via email to members of the early childhood education community in multiple states. This outreach included community college early childhood education faculty, community college early childhood program advisory committee members, university early childhood education faculty, and Head Start teachers and leaders.

Individuals interested in participating in the study were asked to contact me directly via phone or email. I usually held a short phone call with interested people, but some chose to schedule the interview based on our email exchange. Potential participants were provided information about the purpose of the study, the time commitment required

of them for the interviews, the opportunity to participate in a focus group, and how the information they provided would be used (see Appendix B). Throughout the recruitment process, I focused my efforts on emailed personal outreach to colleagues and then expanded this outreach to people who were not already in my professional network. I attempted snowball sampling, or gaining introductions to additional participants from other participants, but to my knowledge, no participants joined the study through another participant (S. R. Jones et al., 2006).

One of the most poignant moments I had during my research came shortly after an early childhood specialist at a multi-site migrant Head Start program shared the opportunity to participate in the study with individuals in that program. I received an email from a Head Start teacher that she wanted to participate in the study and we set up a time for an introductory phone call. One of the first the things she said to me was that she was not sure her English was good enough to participate. Ultimately, she could not participate in the study because she did not have an associate degree, but rather had earned a bachelor's degree in her home county and her master's degree in the United States. Although she did not meet the criteria for this study, this conversation stuck with me because at this point there were no participants in the study for whom English was a second language. In an effort to address this I returned to the literature and found that a lack of trust and lack of awareness of studies were found to be reasons underrepresented populations may not participate (Cunningham-Erves et al., 2017).

Cunningham-Erves et al. (2017) also reported that Spanish translated flyers and community meetings were effective ways to include these populations. I had already had

all flyers translated into Spanish (see Appendix C) so, as a result, I advertised a Reunión Comunitaria (see Appendix D) that would be held via Zoom, an online synchronous platform. The intention of this event was to replicate a community meeting in the digital environment. Although only one person attended the event, this outreach led to the interview of the first participant for whom English was a second language.

Participant Selection

The participants are considered the experts regarding the phenomenon (Rudestam & Newton, 2007), specifically, their own experience in the community college early childhood education program. My goal for this study was to represent the Head Start employee population who completed community college early childhood education programs. The primary criteria for participation in the study was employment with Head Start during the completion of the associate degree in a community college early childhood education program. Additional criteria that I kept in mind during my recruitment efforts included the characteristics of adult learners: responsible for the care of another, employed more than 20 hours per week, over the age of 25, independent of parents, and/or experienced a delay between high school attendance and college. In addition, racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity were prioritized in my outreach efforts and as I determined whether to continue to recruit new participants.. In the end, all participants who expressed an interest and met the primary criteria were included in the study.

Ultimately, all of the study participants were from the Northwest state in which I live and work. The study participants were all graduates of community college early

education programs who were employed in Head Start programs when they completed their degrees. They did not need to currently be employed by Head Start. however, all of the participants continued to be employed by Head Start. My original intention was to recruit participants who had completed their associate degrees within the previous three years, however, the participants who agreed to join the study had completed their degrees as many as 10 years to as few as one year prior to the study. Interestingly, the time that had passed since degree completion seemed to have little impact on the participant responses, with no remarkable difference evident. After five interviews, there was a consistency to the responses, and I had a sense that saturation may have been achieved after the sixth interview. While the sixth interview was rich with examples of the emerging concepts, new concepts did not emerge. Despite this saturation, I did not feel that at this point the participants adequately represented the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity necessary to understand the phenomenon, and I completed two additional interviews.

The group of participants were employed by six different Head Start programs and graduated from five different community colleges. They were in their mid-twenties to mid-fifties. Six of the participants were parents at the time they attended community college, five were married and two in partner relationships at that time. Three participants in the study were Latina and five were White. Two participants spoke Spanish as their primary language. The participants spent from 3 to 20 years completing their associate degrees.

Human Subjects and Informed Consent. All participants in the study were adults and participated on a voluntary basis. Phenomenological research involves

collecting and interpreting individual stories from study participants. As such, rigorous attention to confidentiality is essential to ensure an ethical research process, but also to reduce concerns on the part of participants about giving honest responses (Groenwald, 2004). For this study, the expectations outlined in the Human Subjects Review approval were followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for both the interview (see Appendix E) and the focus group (see Appendix F). Through the consent process, participants received an explanation of the study, including length and time expectations, risks of involvement, security of information, and who to contact with questions. My original intent was to describe each participant's background and interview responses individually in the report of the findings. After careful consideration of the transcripts, I determined that individual profiles created a potential for participant identification and instead chose to report the characteristics of the participant group as a community.

Absence of Male Participants

One other note that should be made about the participant pool is that they were all women. The value of men in early childhood education is documented and the recruitment of men into the field an important endeavor (Koch & Farquhar, 2015). However, I think it is also important to recognize that the story of the Head Start employed student seeking to earn their early childhood education degree at a community college is, for now, a story of women, as men make up only 3% of the early childhood workforce (Cole et al., 2019). Habermas (1998) asserted:

> Gender specific differences in life circumstances and experiences do not receive adequate consideration, either legally or informally. Women's cultural

> understanding of themselves does not receive due recognition, any more than does their contribution to the common culture; given the prevailing definitions, women's needs cannot even be adequately articulated. (p. 211)

As such, although the study was not limited to women, it is an intention of this study to illuminate a phenomenon that is primarily a women's experience.

The recruitment and selection of participants, led to their engagement in the phenomenological interviews and focus groups. These data collection instruments are discussed in detail in the following section.

Data Collection Instruments

The goal of phenomenological research is to explore the phenomenon from the viewpoint of those involved (Mason, 2010). In the hermeneutic tradition, phenomenology seeks to interpret meaning in experience (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). As a result, the Head Start employed students and I, as the researcher, were the instruments in the study (Rudestam & Newton, 2007; Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). I engaged in what van Manen (1997) referred to as a conversational relation between the researcher and the participant, with an orientation toward making sense of the phenomenon. I viewed the participants as the experts and our discussions proceeded from what they perceived their experience to be (Morgan, 2011). According to Padilla- Diaz (2005), "The most appropriate data collection strategy for a phenomenological research is the profound interview" (p. 104).

In the following sections, I describe the semi-structured interviews and focus groups that comprised the study.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the experiences of the Head Start employed students. I prepared a set of open-ended questions that I

generally asked each participant, but the conversations were flexible. Throughout each interview, I asked additional clarifying questions and at times engaged in mutual sharing of information with the participant (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). As Sorrell and Redmond (1995) explained, "The skilled interviewer, as the research instrument, uses responses of the participant to guide data collection, probing for further information as needed for depth and clarity" (p. 1118). I created a positive relationship with each participant through the observation of body language, sparking of participant awareness, and positive connections (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995).

To quote Wertz et al. (2011), "Phenomenological research utilizes the full sensitivity, knowledge, and powers of comprehension of the researcher and is consequently quite personal" (p. 130). The participants in this study openly shared their challenges and success in our conversations. They expressed emotions ranging from joy to frustration and I found myself connecting with these emotions and their stories, making it natural to ask follow up questions, many of which I had not specifically planned, in the context of our conversation.

Location and Time. In order to allow privacy and focus it was planned that the interviews would be held in neutral locations, with time allowed for establishing rapport (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995) and in-depth conversation. Participants were encouraged to select a time and location for the interview that was comfortable for them. Possible locations included a private room at their work site, a private room at the community college or a local coffee shop. The first three interviews were conducted in person, with two of these at the participants' worksite and one at the local community college. Due to

the safety concerns brought about by COVID-19 pandemic, all subsequent interviews were held via Zoom. It was my impression that the Zoom meetings were very similar in tone and participant comfort to the face-to-face interviews. Since all of the participants were using Zoom in their workplace by the time the interviews took place, this may have contributed to both the participants' and my own comfort with the technology. Use of the Zoom platform may also have limited my ability to observe body language, however, at the same time, may have increased the possibility of participation for people from across a larger geographical area. The interviews were scheduled to last around and hour, but were flexible as the participants' schedules allowed. The interviews were recorded so that transcripts could provide a full account of participant responses. During the interview process it was at the forefront of my thinking that the participant report and perception is sought and that presuppositions should be set aside (Mason, 2010; Morgan, 2011).

Interview Questions. Though the conversations are generally unstructured, the phenomenological interview does have direction and purpose (Morgan, 2011). I began by asking an open-ended question, then actively listened, and guided the discussion with follow-up questions that probed more deeply into the details of the experience (Morgan, 2011). Because participants have different abilities to reflect on and communicate their experience, I avoided introducing specific ideas that they did not broach and used their vernacular as much as possible (Morgan, 2011; Polkinghorne, 2005).

In order to create a relaxed environment, I spoke conversationally with participants before each interview officially started, which led easily to the first question, and continued the interview in this conversational tone.

I generally began each hour-long interview with a question about the participants' home and family situation while they attended community college, but sometimes started with discussing how they came to work for Head Start or how they started taking classes. Open-ended questions were asked to focus the conversation on the research questions and learn more about the participants' experiences. The questions I had prepared to help guide the interviews were:

- Describe your family or home situation during the time you were taking classes.
- Were there things that made college difficult?
- What supported you in getting your degree?
- How did you feel being a college student?
- How did you learn best?
- Tell me how you came to work for Head Start.
- What was it like to be in the early childhood education program?
- Were there things that felt like barriers to you?
- What did you enjoy about your experience?
- How did you know you could do it?
- Did you feel ready for the classes you took?
- Did you take any online classes? What was that like?

These questions were not intended to be in a particular order and were primarily used to prompt the conversation. Often the participant ended up talking about something related to an upcoming question before it was asked. As Polkinghorne (2005) explained, "the researcher knows in advance the experience he or she wants the participant to describe

and has often written out questions (or protocols) he or she wants the participant to cover" (p. 142). Overall, the interviews seemed to reach a natural point of conclusion when all of the questions had been addressed. Generally, the interviews concluded with a prompt for the participant to share anything else they wanted to about their experience.

Focus Groups

The participants had the opportunity to participate in focus groups following the initial analysis of the data. As summarized by Nyumba et al. (2018),

> Focus group discussion is a technique where a researcher assembles a group of individuals to discuss a specific topic, aiming to draw from the complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of the participants through a moderated interaction. (p. 21)

In addition to eliciting deeper understanding of the participants' experiences, the focus groups served as a follow-up or member-check with participants to corroborate emerging themes (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

Prior to the focus groups, I provided participants with several pages of their quotes, clustered as they would appear in the report, and a brief summary of the preliminary themes that had emerged from the interviews (Koelsch et al., 2013). In a focus group setting, participants can experience discomfort at revisiting their words and in the shift in power form the original interview, in which they are electing what to disclose (Buchbinder, 2010; Koelsch et al., 2013). As such, I decided to only provide participants with their own statements prior to the focus group. I asked the participants open-ended questions to encourage discussion of the themes and as a way to examine the data and develop the most accurate description of each theme (Kakulu, 2008). Breen (2006) explained, the process of a focus group can lead to a change in the level of

importance of a theme as participants refute it or provide perspective through the social interactions themselves, which was the case in this study.

There is not consensus that this social interaction in the focus group is a valid instrument in phenomenological research (Webb & Kevern, 2001). However, in this study, it was not the sole means of data collection and examples of focus group use in phenomenological studies are certainly found in the literature (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2009). Nyumba et al (2018) asserted that while the interview provides the one-to-one interaction between the researcher and the participant, the focus group shifts the role of the researcher to facilitator and creates the possibility for "synergistic relationships among participants to generate data" (p. 22), "without imposing a conceptual framework compared with a structured individual interview" (p. 29). Participation in the focus group was optional to ensure participant control over confidentiality. Seven of the eight participants elected to participate in the focus group.

I conducted two different focus groups to accommodate participants' schedules, with each lasting approximately two hours. There were four participants in one group and three in the other. Procedural considerations were drawn from the literature with the key aspect being interactions between the participants (Flynn et al., 2018, p. 1). While the original plan for the focus group was a face-to-face meeting, COVID-19 pandemic precautions necessitated the use of Zoom. One advantage of using Zoom was that participants from different geographical areas could meet together. Flynn et al. (2018) found that "video conferencing offered similar data richness to FTF focus groups" (p. 7)

and that it “allowed participants to communicate FTF in real time in a familiar setting” (p. 7).

Drawing on important considerations outlined by Nyumba et al. (2018), I used the following guidelines for the focus groups:

- Build rapport and facilitate a relaxed and comfortable environment;
- Actively listen and engage by paraphrasing;
- Keep the length to one to two hours based on the topic and questions;
- Utilize observation skills and pay attention to body language, demeanor and group dynamics;
- Employ good communication skills and be knowledgeable regarding the topic discussed;
- Be impartial and flexible and maintain a sense of humor.

At the outset of each focus group, I asked participants to introduce themselves and include their Head Start program if they were comfortable doing so. I followed this by explaining that if we were together in person our meeting would have included snacks or a meal, but that since we were virtual, I would ask them to share their favorite food instead. This helped create a lighthearted and relaxed atmosphere.

The conversation prompts for the focus group were developed based on the initial interviews and were intended to facilitate a deeper discussion of the emerging themes. I began by drawing their attention to each cluster of data that I had provided and asking if there was additional information about that cluster they wanted to share. As we went through each cluster, participants added details or memories, often building on one another’s remarks. Once we had gone through each cluster, I presented the preliminary themes one at a time, asking how they did or did not resonate with them and encouraging

them to comment about what felt accurate or inaccurate about them. Again, in the discussion of the themes, the participants talked among themselves and connected their experiences to the experiences of others.

The eight interviews and two focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by a reputable service to allow for in-depth analysis (Creswell, 2005). As explained by Polkinghorne (2005):

> It is normal practice in qualitative interviewing to audio record the sessions. The recordings are transcribed, passing from the original oral form into written form. The purpose of the conversion into a written account is to allow the detailed and to-and-fro reading required in the analysis of qualitative data. (p. 142)

To ensure confidentiality the transcriptions and recordings were kept in a locked file in a private office or on a password protected computer. In all written accounts, including this report, participants are identified only by pseudonyms.

Conducting the phenomenological interviews and focus groups such as described above requires an engaged and interested researcher. In the next section, I discuss my positionality as it relates to the study and my role in the research.

My Role as a Phenomenological Researcher

According to van Manen (1997), "the method one chooses ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator . . . in the first place" (p. 2). As both a community college and early childhood educator, I believe the education of Head Start employed students is a critical concern for both fields. The researcher's role in a phenomenological study is to engage in a cycle of gathering, synthesizing and reflecting upon the experience of a particular group, and to be attentive to the themes that emerge from this process. The subjective nature of the phenomenological study is

inevitable (Finlay, 2009). The phenomenological researcher must be aware of and "question the taken-for-granted assumptions that we have in relation to the world" (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 15). For me, this included being aware that I bring my own life experience and bias as a White, female, native speaker of English, educated in the U.S. Further, as Seidman (2019) explained, "the social forces of class, ethnicity, race and other social identities," affect the relationship between the participant and interviewer. Another component of my identity is that of a community college and early childhood educator.

I have worked at one community college for just over 20 years, first as a classroom teacher in the college lab school, then as an adjunct and full-time faculty member in early childhood education, and currently, as an academic dean. In each of my roles at the community college, I have worked with Head Start employed students. Given my experiences, it was indeed inevitable that I came to this research with subjective preconceptions of these students' experiences. Adopting and maintaining a phenomenological attitude was an important commitment in my research process. Dahlberg (2006) described the phenomenological attitude that the researcher must assume; one that includes "restraining of one's preunderstanding in the form of personal beliefs, theories, and other assumptions that otherwise would mislead the understanding of meaning and thus limit the researching openness" (p. 16). This attitude can be further understood from van Manen's (1997) explanation that "The phenomenological method consists of the ability, or rather the art of being sensitive—sensitive to the subtle undertones of language, the way language speaks when it allows the things themselves to speak" (p. 111).

One of the reasons I chose the phenomenological paradigm is that it does not require the researcher to be detached from the research (Mason, 2010). Capturing this notion, van Manen (1997) explained "it is always a project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social, and historical life circumstances, sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence" (p. 31). I had an instructor/student relationship with some participants in the study as a former faculty member, current part time faculty member, and administrator for the community college early childhood education program from which those participants graduated. I also had familiarity with faculty and programs at three of the other community colleges participants attended. Ideally, this means that my work in the community college served as an asset to the study. This connection allowed me to access potential participants and may have increased their willingness to participate in the study. I was able to ask questions, follow trains of thought and delve deeply into participant responses during the interviews (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). However, this required a keen awareness and sensitivity to my own beliefs and biases. My goal was to harness my subjectivity and employ a phenomenological attitude that Finlay (2009) referred to as empathic wonderment. I focused on listening attentively and responding appropriately based on the participants' responses (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). I found that I had no trouble focusing my full attention on the participants during the interviews. I was fully engaged by their stories and deeply interested in their experiences.

I have rich and varied experiences and memories of working with Head Start employed students in the community college. I have seen the work that it takes for them to

achieve the degree, while working in their Head Start programs. While I have gotten to know many of these students over the years, and seen glimpses into their personal lives, I have not delved deeply into their individual stories. This led to my true curiosity, or abiding concern (S. R. Jones et al., 2006), for understanding their perspective and value of their personal experiences. I see my research as part of the learning process that Flyvbjerg (2006) explained:

> If one, thus, assumes that the goal of the researcher's work is to understand and learn about the phenomena being studied, then research is simply a form of learning. If one assumes that research, like other learning processes, can be described by the phenomenology for human learning, it then becomes clear that the most advanced form of understanding is achieved when researchers place themselves within the context of being studied. (p. 236)

At the same time, in a phenomenological study, this close connection means that the burden is on the researcher to show that the results were not affected by their personal beliefs, values and assumptions (Morgan, 2011). I had to constantly give attention to letting the participant experience emerge and to taking nothing for granted (Morgan, 2011). van Manen (1997) warned "Unless the researcher remains strong in his or her orientation to the fundamental question or notion, there will be many temptations to get side-tracked or to wander aimlessly and indulge in wishy-washy speculations, to settle for preconceived opinions and conceptions" (p. 33). Bracketing is an approach I utilized to maintain this orientation.

Bracketing. One method that helps ensure that the researcher's beliefs and assumptions do not affect the results is the bracketing of one's preconceived ideas (Morgan, 2011). Lundgren and Dahlberg (1998) described bracketing this way: "the

researcher holds in abeyance theoretical and experiential knowledge, preconceived notions or expectations about the phenomenon" (p. 106).

I reflectively engaged in bracketing in an attempt to identify and set aside assumptions throughout the research (Finlay, 2009; Groenwald, 2004). Throughout the research process, this included looking at the language I used in describing the phenomena and attempting to identify my preconceived ideas about the Head Start employed students' experience in community college early childhood education programs. One specific bracketing exercise I engaged in reminded me that while I may have some experiences similar to the study participants, I have not experienced the phenomenon. The following statements resulted from that writing and were useful for me to revisit as I completed various parts of the study. While I have:

- Worked as a classroom teacher and home visitor, I have not worked for Head Start.
- Been a student and a parent at the same time, I was not a parent while earning my associate degree.
- Taught many students for whom English was a second language, I have never been a student in a setting that was not based in my primary language.
- Did attend community college, I was not what would be considered an adult learner.

For the most part, my presuppositions were found in what I thought I might hear more often, such as the burdens of practicum or challenges with writing or homework requirements. Alternatively, they were found in things I did not know I would hear about, such as the challenges with transportation or time it took to get to campus and the deeply felt commitment participants held for the Head Start program. Once these presuppositions were identified, I was able to revisit them throughout the research process and attempt to

suspend them in order to let the voices of the participants emerge. As Hycner (1985) explained:

> It means suspending (bracketing) as much as possible the researcher's meanings and interpretations and entering into the world of the unique individual who was interviewed. It means using the matrices of that person's world-view in order to understand the meaning of what the person is saying, rather than what the researcher expects the person to say. (p. 281)

As Wilson and Washington (2007) explained, "bracketing does not eliminate the investigator's presuppositions; rather, it allows them to be brought into clearer view" (p. 65). I believe this has been the case in this study.

Analysis of the Data

The phenomenological method is not concerned with proving a general hypothesis or scientific theory (Mason 2010; Morgan, 2011). It is instead concerned with making sense of experience based on personal accounts (Morgan, 2011). These accounts are usually collected through interviews, the predominant method of data collection in phenomenology (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). In this study, the participants' stories are the data. van Manen (1997) described the anecdotes that occur in phenomenological writing as poetic narratives to be valued. In phenomenological research, the analysis includes both what is expressed and how it is expressed, ultimately moving toward descriptions, contexts, hidden discourses, meanings, and essences (Groenwald, 2004; Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

The following sections describe my process of analyzing the data, which included organization and thematic analysis, interpretation of the findings, and, ultimately, reporting those findings.

Organization and Thematic Analysis of the Data

In qualitative research, the processes of collecting and analyzing data are simultaneous (Creswell, 2005). The researcher reads and analyzes data while still conducting interviews. Husserl (2017) emphasized here the intuitive and imaginative spirit with which phenomenological analysis in undertaken, encouraging fanciful and free intuition as we search for essences. Upon receiving each transcript, I reviewed it while listening to the audio recording and reflected on the meaning or "constellation of experiences" (Adams & van Manen, 2017, p. 782). At this point, I began to identify and list commonalities among the experiences that seemed to be emerging in the search for preliminary themes (Morgan, 2011).

The data in this study are the words the participants used to describe their experiences. Rather than numbers, the data in a qualitative study is language that is the product of an interaction, and the meaning that is in this text is the evidence (Polkinghorne, 2005). Dahlberg (2006) described the rich data yielded in the phenomenological study:

> The constituents are individualizations, or particulars of the structure, and thus the essence must be seen in every constituent. At the same time, the description of the constituents gives the contextual flavor to the essence description and the full taste of the description is given with quotes from the original source of the meaning in the first place, e.g. interviews. (p. 14)

My analysis of the interviews and focus group data included identifying noteworthy quotes, important themes, and unexpected findings (Breen, 2006).

Phenomenological research helps make visible and elucidates the structural features of a phenomenon, with each description being an example that points to and attempts to describe the phenomenon (van Manen, 1997). I explored the similarities and

differences in the participants' accounts to develop the thematic structure. (Morgan, 2011). Wertz et al. (2011) identified the following as Procedures for Achieving General Findings: identifying potentially general insights in individual structures; comparing individual examples of the experience for general characteristics; imaginative variation of individual examples to identify generally invariant features and organizations; explicit description of general psychological structures. Morgan (2011) explained:

> Thematizing is the process by which the primary investigator identifies what is figural, first for one participant and then for all participants in a particular study. To do this, the researcher looks both within and across texts so as to enlarge his or her perspective from what is figural to one participant to what is figural to all participants about an experience (p. 33).

While there are a wide variety of nuanced approaches used to identify themes, in this study, the major activities undertaken to develop thematic structure were most significantly influenced by van Manen and by Morgan and included interpreting texts, thematizing and developing thematic structure, and developing a graphic representation.

Interpreting Texts. To begin the interpretation of the texts, I read the whole of the texts, analyzing the language used by participants, including emotions and expressions to find fundamental meaning (van Manen, 1997). I developed a preliminary and broad list of ideas. Next, using van Manen's (1997) selective reading approach, I highlighted the statements or phrases that seemed particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon and refined the list of ideas into categories. To some degree, these categories aligned with my questions, but I began to see ideas or concepts emerging that seemed to be of the phenomenon. I then organized the participant responses into these categories as a way to further examine their relationship to one another and the emerging themes. This

process was informed by van Manen's (1997) wholistic and sententious, selective highlighting approach:

> As we thus study the lived-experience descriptions and discern the themes that begin to emerge, then we may note that certain experiential themes recur as commonality or possible commonalities in the various descriptions we have gathered. The task is to hold on to these themes by lifting appropriate phrases or by capturing in singular statements the main thrust of the meaning of the themes. (p. 93)

Throughout this process, I organized the data into categories, refining them and clustering the data multiple times.

Thematizing and Developing Thematic Structure. I identified preliminary themes based on consistent, but not necessarily identical, meaning. These were titled using participants' language through looking at examples and counter examples (Morgan, 2011). This step involves writing that helps orient the researcher to the lived experience and creates the reflective cognitive stance (van Manen, 1997). As van Manen (1997) asserted, "writing is the method" (p. 126), and it "teaches us what we know and in what way we know what we know" (p. 127). I wrote numerous drafts of each preliminary theme.

At this point, the member check-in took place via the focus group to corroborate themes (Simon & Goes, n.d.). As explained by Padilla-Diaz (2015), "corroboration with participants consists of presenting and discussing data analysis between the researcher and the research participants to verify the essences and meanings are in fact those expressed directly or indirectly by the participants" (p. 107). Hancock et al. (2016) found that focus group data could be analyzed individually or by the group in phenomenological studies. In this case, the focus group findings added further detail and

depth to individual participant stories that were brought out through the group conversation. The focus group discussions clarified and strengthened the preliminary themes, allowing the development of the final presentation of the themes. In addition to the focus groups with the participants, I also conducted a peer debrief.

The peer debrief, or meeting with disinterested peers, was intended to provide an additional check on my bias and an opportunity for more feedback on the accuracy of the themes as they relate to the participants' reported perception of their experiences (Henry, 2015). The peers consisted of two early childhood education faculty members from two different community colleges, a community college faculty member from a program unrelated to early childhood, an early learning program executive director, and a community member with a background in education. I provided the peers with a draft of the findings, the preliminary themes, and the graphic representation to review. I also provided them with a list of questions designed to encourage them to consider concepts I was missing or how my bias and presuppositions might be influencing my work to that point. We met via Zoom for approximately one hour, with me asking them a variety of questions. Two of the peers also provided me with written feedback on the draft. As did the corroboration with the participants, the peer debrief provided an opportunity for me to reflect on my interpretation and presentation of the findings.

Following the focus groups and the peer debrief, a final written description of each theme was developed. This description includes discussion of the relationships among the themes. The themes highlight "important commonalities of lived experience from different angles" (Morgan, 2011, p. 33). The themes represent the connected findings from the

individual interviews and the focus groups. As Seidman (2019) explained, "the reason an interviewer spends so much time talking to participants is to find out what *their* experience is and the meaning *they* make of it, and then to make connections among the experiences" (p. 135).

Graphic Representation. Finally, I developed a graphic representation that represents an overview of the total pattern of the themes. Through multiple iterations of the graphic, I attempted to relate significant aspects of the experiences to one another and the whole (Morgan, 2011). The most challenging aspect of developing the graphic was ensuring that it did not represent more than was actually present in the findings. The graphic representation is presented and discussed in Chapter 5.

Reporting the Findings

"Our lived experiences and the structures of meanings (themes) in terms of which these lived experiences can be described and interpreted constitute the immense complexity of the lifeworld" (van Manen, 1997, p. 101). The themes and thematic structure constitute the key findings in the report (Morgan, 2011). These themes are put back in context (Hycner, 1985) using written descriptions and participant quotes. In this case, that context includes the participants' experiences with the community college, the Head Start program and, to some extent, the individual lives of the participants. Along with conducting the interviews and focus groups, an important activity of my research was engaging in a process of writing and rewriting the themes and the report. van Manen (1997) explained ". . . to *do* research in a phenomenological sense is already and immediately and always a bringing to speech of something. And this thoughtfully

bringing to speech of something is most commonly a writing activity" (p. 32). Dahlberg (2006) explained, "in the research report, one describes the whole structure, with its most essential part(s) and the horizons" (p. 14).

This chapter provided an overview of the phenomenological method that was used to plan and conduct interviews and focus groups, present the findings, and identify themes that will illuminate the experiences of Head Start employed students in community college early childhood education programs in which they earned their associate degrees.

In Chapter 4, I present the findings from the interviews and focus groups in clusters that organize the data. Dahlberg (2006) suggested to first present the essence of the phenomenon, noting that without this it is difficult to ". . . see what the constituents are constituents *of*" (p. 14).

In Chapter 5, the findings are synthesized into broad themes that emerged and reported along with the graphic representation. Additional details about the participants, the interviews, and the focus group are reported in both chapters (Breen, 2006).

Chapter 4: Findings

Over the past several decades, a series of federal mandates increased the educational requirements for Head Start teachers. As a result, many of those employed by Head Start have enrolled in community college early childhood education programs. This is a natural partnership, given the affordability and accessibility of these programs (Cavanagh et al., 2010) While community colleges may be an ideal access point for these individuals to higher education, these institutions are often challenged by low degree completion rates (Wyner, 2014). Understanding how Head Start employed students have successfully earned their degrees is important because these individuals are more likely to represent the socio-economic, racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the children and families served by the program. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of Head Start teachers in community college early childhood education programs in which they earned their degrees. I used a phenomenological method to explore the research question:

> How do individuals who completed their associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs, while employed in Head Start programs, perceive their experience?

In addition, I explored the following sub-questions:

- What challenges or barriers do these individuals report?
- What factors do these students identify as contributing to their success?

In order to gain insight into these questions, and thus the phenomena of Head Start employed students completing their early childhood education degrees, I conducted phenomenological interviews and follow up focus groups with eight women who were employed by Head Start during the time when they earned their associate degrees.

At the end of this chapter, the findings from those interviews are presented. The chapter begins with a discussion of reflection and theme development in this study, including a section about my bracketing or suspending judgement during this process. The findings are presented primarily in the form of the interview and focus group excerpts, which have been organized to illuminate the experiences of the participants. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study.

Reflective Analysis

The phenomenological approach required me to reflect upon the data, specifically the participants' stories, to reveal or allow a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. As van Manen (1997), explained, "we try to unearth something 'telling,' something 'meaningful,' in the various experiential accounts—we work at mining meaning from them" (p. 86). This work begins with writing the descriptions that "creates the reflective cognitive stance" (p. 125). Ultimately, leading us toward making sense of something (van Manen, 1997). Dahlberg (2006) put it this way:

> Searching for the essence, that most invariant structure of meanings for an actual context we typically work with the different meanings that are present in the descriptions. We try to discover a pattern of meanings that partly is made up by the difference and similarities among the meanings. (p. 14)

I read the interview and focus group texts multiple times, organized the data into clusters, and identified the emerging themes.

A distinction is made between reflectively studying the interview texts and content analysis in other types of research. Content analysis presupposes the meaning of certain phrases or ideas, whereas the construction of the thematic phrase is done without a predetermined notion of the meaning that will be found (van Manen, 1997). And, while

there may be various approaches, isolating themes forms a common thread in phenomenological research just as the phenomenological researcher accepts that these themes "do not do justice to the fullness of the life of a phenomenon" (van Manen, 1997, p. 92).

Initial Review

The process of interpretation in a phenomenological study is a careful, and I would say, almost sacred one. Gadamer (1989) stated:

> What constitutes the hermeneutical event proper is not language as language, whether as grammar or as lexicon; it consists in the coming into language of what has been said in the tradition: an event that is at once appropriation and interpretation. Thus here it really is true to say that this event is at once appropriation and interpretation. (p. 479)

Laverty (2003) summarized, the interpretive process as being "achieved thorough a hermeneutic circle which moves from the parts of the experience, to the whole of the experience to increase the depth of engagement with and the understanding of the texts" (p. 24). As I outlined in Chapter 3, the process for determining the themes of the phenomenon began with exploring what ideas were present in the data.

After completing several interviews, I started to see certain ideas emerging and noted ideas that were present in more than one interview. The initial ideas that emerged were:

- Brave, competent, empowered. I can do this.
- Consideration of earning a bachelor degree in the future
- Faculty support
- Family support
- Job advancement

- Loved working at Head Start
- Overall positive experience
- Participants' children experiencing them getting the degree
- School work on top of work
- Stress. Tired.
- Support from Head Start
- Taking longer than two years to get the degree
- The math requirement
- Time of class, driving to class, night classes

At this stage, I noted where participants were sharing similar experiences, ideas that stood out as having subtle commonalities, and certain events that were unique to individuals. This initial organizing of the responses allowed me to begin considering themes and informed my understanding of whether new ideas were emerging as I conducted subsequent interviews.

Developing Themes

The themes, presented in Chapter 5, were developed using thoughtful reflection over the course of the research (van Manen, 1997). I analyzed the interview transcripts throughout the research process for the phrases, experiences, and concepts that came up repeatedly in the interviews and, further, for that which came up recurrently in different ways and in connection to different questions and different parts of the interviews. As van Manen (1997) described, "phenomenological themes are not objects or generalizations; metaphorically speaking they are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun" (p. 90).

This first part of the thematic interpretation included organizing the participant responses into categories that included Home and Family, Challenges, Supports, Attending College, Working for Head Start, and The Experience. These are similar to the clusters in to which the data is organized in the following section. While these clusters were a helpful tool for organizing the data, and began to hint at the themes, these categories did not constitute the themes. Throughout this process, I kept two important directions from the literature front of mind. The first being that this was not a process of counting or tallying how many times something was said or how many participants had used a certain phrase. Instead, I was searching to attend intentionally to the phenomenon, to understand it, and to be involved with its essences (Dahlberg, 2006). Additionally, I was cognizant that it was not my role to change the data into something else, but rather to illuminate it. As Dahlberg (2006) further explained, "it is not the researcher who gives essences their meaning" (p. 12).

I developed a draft of the themes and reviewed these with the participants during the focus groups. The participants generally expressed that the themes reflected their experiences. However, the discussion among the participants led me to a deeper understanding of the strength of each theme and areas that did not fully or accurately reflect the participants' perception of their experiences.

Before presenting the findings, I briefly discuss how suspending judgement and bracketing were important during the analysis of the data.

Suspending Judgement

While the phenomenological approach includes "suspending one's judgement or bracketing particular beliefs about the phenomenon in order to see clearly" (Laverty, 2003, p. 23), throughout the process, I found this to be the most applicable and necessary during the process of developing the themes. So much of what I heard from the participants was familiar to me, both from the literature and from my own experience, it was necessary to bracket this prior knowledge in order to be as open as possible to new ideas. I also utilized this stance to attend to ways in which the familiar was different from what I might have assumed it to be.

In order to focus on this illumination of the participants' experiences, I constantly returned to their words. As I wrote iterations of the themes, I went back to the transcripts and reminded myself of how the participants described their experiences. At the same time, I found that my experience was aligning with what Dowling (2007) described as Gadamer's (1989) hermeneutic process of a "dialogical method whereby the horizon of the interpreter and the phenomenon being studied are combined together" (p. 134). For example, one participant shared her experience of leaving the children and families in her Head Start program to work with the children at her practicum site. I have heard this same concern from Head Start employed students as a faculty member. I even recalled a certain student who was deeply troubled by this. Based on this memory, I decided I needed to pause and hear what the participant was saying and what her emotions were about it, while still acknowledging that these prior experiences likely caused me to tune into that portion of her story in a different way. I think Gadamer's (1989) description is

helpful here: “The hermeneutic experience also has its own rigor; that of uninterrupted listening. A thing does not present itself to hermeneutical experience without an effort special to it ” (p. 481).

Interview and Focus Group Findings

What follows is the report from the interviews and the focus groups. The findings consist primarily of the participants own words from the interviews and focus groups. Selecting the excerpts to include came out of my immersion in the data and careful consideration of the connections among the passages and their connection to the literature (Seidman, 2019). Despite the inclusion of a thorough selection of passages to ensure the primacy of the participant voices, the narrative is still, as Seidman (2019) describes, “necessarily limited” and “a function of [my] interactions with the participants and their words” (p. 137).

While phenomenological interview responses are often presented in individual participant profiles, I have elected not to connect the responses to detailed descriptions of the individual participants in order to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The participants own words are presented as the primary finding throughout this section to place the emphasis on the lived experience of the individuals (van Manen, 1997) and to allow “the reader to judge how far and in what way a research result can be generalized” (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 16). Because the semi-structured interviews did not unfold in the exact same order, and included follow up questions, responses are included where they are relevant and may not have been given in response to the same question by all participants. The responses and conversations from the focus groups are presented with

the cluster where they expand on a particular area and in the discussion of the themes. The participant responses are presented in the following six clusters and related sub-categories:

- Cluster #1: Home and Family
- Cluster #2: Challenges and Support
    - Challenges in Getting the Degree
    - Support in Getting the Degree: Family, Head Start, Faculty
- Cluster #3: The College Experience
    - Being in the Early Childhood Education Program
    - Learning, Online Courses, and General Education
    - Barriers to Success
- Cluster #4 Working for Head Start
- Cluster #5: Enjoyment, Growing Confidence, and Sustaining Momentum
- Cluster #6: Effect on Their Children

This section begins with a short introduction of the participants as a community, which is followed by a presentation of the six clusters that are used to organize the interview and focus group responses and to bring the individual and collective voices of the participants to light.

The Community of Participants

The community of participants included eight women who have worked for Head Start from two to 30 years and who all earned their associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs while working for Head Start. While their individual stories come to light in the presentation of the findings, I am reporting the

characteristics of the group as a whole, rather than by participant, in an effort to maximize their anonymity.

The participants range in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties. Six of the participants were parents at the time they attended community college, five were married, and two were in partner relationships at that time. The participants work in six different Head Start programs, with only one currently working in a different program than she was when she attended community college. The programs the participants work in are in rural and suburban areas of one Northwest state and include migrant and Tribal Head Start programs. Seven of the participants currently work as teachers, teacher/advocates, or home visitors, and one is currently a supervisor. The participants attended five different community colleges in the Northwest state and took from three to 20 years to complete their associate degrees. All names used in the report are pseudonyms.

Cluster #1: Home and Family

At the outset of each interview, I asked the participants to describe their family and home situation during the time they were earning their degree. Of the eight participants, six had children at the time they attended community college and two did not. Some of these children were enrolled in Head Start programs. Seven participants were in partner relationships, with five of these being married.

> **Julie:** My family situation at that time when I enrolled in an associate program was I had recently been divorced. Well, not recently. I mean, I was divorced and I had no children at home. Then I later remarried and began college at [the community college]. So basically, it was just my husband and myself.
>
> **Beneita:** That's my husband, and my two daughters, and one son. My son is the big one, and my daughter right now is [in her late twenties]. But at this time when I take my classes he was in the middle school. My big daughter was in the elementary school and my little daughter was so young, like five years . . . Yeah.

> And this is very hard. This how I want to participate in this [study], because I want to . . . I can help a little bit with somebody that they say, "No, I can do that." Say, "Yeah, we can, because that's so hard. It's not easy, but we can."
>
> **Megan:** It's just me and my husband and our animals. So, my home life was pretty much non-stressful. My husband does have . . . he does suffer from some mental illness, some that he was born with, one that he got because of the service. So, being his wife/caregiver has been a challenge while going to school and working. But, it wasn't a daily thing. So, pretty much I was able to come home and do what I needed to do. I didn't have children to worry about. I made dinner for me and him. If I wanted to not make it, it wasn't a big deal. So, pretty easy, I feel.
>
> **Gabriella:** I was living with a roommate to begin with in [city], and then I moved to a town home in [city] and it was just too big and too lonely. And then I moved into an apartment with a coworker and then [my boyfriend and I] bought a house. So I moved over to [city] and it's just been me, my boyfriend and his son every other week.
>
> **Sabrina:** So I have a partner, we're not married but, I had a 12 year old son at the time, now he's 25. Yeah. And I was working and it felt like I come home and I would work. I only took like six credits at a time because that's all I can handle with work, and I got straight A's.
>
> **Kim:** Yes. I had three kids. My first classes at [community college] were offered, I think, [on site at Head Start]. They would say, "Hey, Kim, we're having a class out here in [city]. Do you want to join?" Or "All of us girls are going to go to class in [city]. Do you want to ride along and take this class?" And I'm like, "Oh, sure. I'll take a class." So, at the time, yeah, I had a three-year-old and a six-year-old and a 10-year-old and my husband. Yeah. I did. I had a full . . . A lot of kids and a husband and a life and a full-time job. But I did [it]. I started out just taking . . . I think my very first one was [Family and Community], and I loved it.
>
> **Cathy:** Oh wow! I was working. I had an eight-month-old boy and a three-year-old boy, my children, single mom. And I was learning to do everything I could to better myself, and so I started taking classes. I took one per term because I didn't know if I could really handle it. When I got hired at Head Start and I started classes, I got a car, brand new one. And so I felt safe going to different places that I needed to go, especially [community college].

Cathy continued, saying:

> . . . as the time went on, it was real tiring being a single mom and going home and I was tired. You had to do all the domestic things and the work. Because I was so new at early childhood education, it was all going over my head. I was really

> struggling because I wasn't quite understanding it. I remember having some people help me and some of the instructors were so awesome because they worked with me and could see I was struggling. But I really wanted to get this education because it was being offered to me, and I felt like I was a perfectionist too. I had to do everything perfect. So I had to get good grades. So that was really a big thing for me back then.
>
> **Juanita:** When I start at school, my daughter was three years old and my son five years old. My husband support me a lot because he helped me with my children. When he arrived at home after his job, he helped me with the children. He gave the dinner for them. He take [them] out, walking…because I was doing my homework. My children was younger, "Mommy, mommy." My husband would say, "Your mommy is busy. Your mommy is making a homework." "I want play with mommy, my mommy." "Yeah, I know. Right now, your brother, and you and me, we are going to work a little bit." He helped me a lot, a lot, a lot.
>
> I was, "Oh my God." I [have to] to run. When I will finish the school, sometimes I run to the school to pick up them and drop to the babysitter and go back to the school. The beginning when I started school, I was working too and I was [in] school. It was so stressful, and I decide to leave my job for a while because it was too much. My children was young. I need working at home too, and they're my family and the school. It was difficult at the beginning.

In addition to sharing information about their family and home situation, participants mentioned in one way or another that they were working when they attended community college. All but one participant emphasized working and taking classes when asked about their family, and some mentioned the number of classes they took at a time or how long it took them to complete their degree. Several participants mentioned the difficulty of working, taking classes, and maintaining family life.

> **Cathy:** . . . going to school, working, going home, cooking dinner. It was overwhelming. It was a big load. That's why I decided I took one class a term. They wanted me to take more classes. Not just one. And I just couldn't, and I might've taken three a year.
>
> **Sabrina:** After working with 20 kids, I mean our classrooms were 20 kids and just finding the energy to go home and do your homework when you're done working.

> **Gabriella:** It took quite a while because I was working and the classes were during the day and it was so hard. I had to wait a semester to take a class. It got really difficult to consistently finish it.
>
> **Kim:** The commute. The commute's quite a commute . . . And especially if you were going winter term, you had to cross over [mountain pass]. And then also making sure I had someone to pick the kids up from their sports or afterschool activities, because my husband works here in [city] too. So, nobody was out in the area that we lived. And with the workload . . . I still was working full-time. So, the workload didn't change just because I had school. I still had to get 40 hours of the work done and go to school.

When asked about home and family, the challenge of home family, work and taking classes was front of mind for the participants. Kim further described the experience of leaving her work site to attend classes and the feeling that she was “juggling” to get everything done.

> **Kim:** Probably juggling, just mainly juggling my schedule . . . and still get everything done. Because there was a lot. I mean, Head Start is a ton of paperwork. It's so much paperwork and so many families that are in high need or crisis. Then it's like, "Oh, well, I'll catch you later. I've got to get to class," or making sure I was still a team player with the people at work, because I wasn't working the other couple days a week that they were working, and we'd still have to plan things . . . Even though we're individual workers, we'd still have to plan socializations together. And if you're not there, you kind of feel like you're not pulling your weight.

Although Juanita’s daughter attended Head Start, it was a part day program, she was also in childcare.

> **Juanita:** My daughter was in Head Start. Also, the social work that was in this place, she helped me a lot too because she asked me all the time, "Are you okay?" "Yes, I'm okay." "How's school?" "Good." "I see a little worry. Tell me. I can help you something?" I say, "Oh, it's because the lady that care my daughter before has started for school. She moved, and I'm thinking how we do it because she lived very close to me and they moved." Not far away, but I was thinking, "Now, I need to go more early, but how I would do when that my daughter out of the school?"

Julie talked about how she perceived the experiences of her co-workers in comparison to her own experience of not having children at home while she went to school and having a supportive spouse.

> **Julie:** I was really fortunate, unlike some of the staff that I have worked with. Some of the employees that I worked with and/or supervised, they didn't really have the support and the conditions that I had. I say I had it pretty easy a lot of the time when my children were gone away from home, or not in my same home with me. I had it pretty easy because I wasn't their primary caregiver. But that wasn't true for a lot of the women that I have worked with and supervised over the years. So I know how hard it is. And my husband has just been super supportive of all of my education and any I dream that I have, so that makes a huge difference.

While my questions about home and family brought up some of the conditions that might have been challenging or supportive for participants, I continued to ask more specific questions about challenges and supports, in particular as they related to attending community college.

Cluster #2: Challenges and Supports

We talked about issues that made college difficult. Participants who were parenting while taking classes identified that being a parent and going to school was a challenge. Working and going to school also presented a challenge, and the participants noted they had home responsibilities that did not stop when they were in school

> **Kim:** There was many nights. Don't come in my room; I'm studying. Or saying late at work so I could use the computer, because we didn't have very good Wi-Fi. Or we didn't have a computer for a while, so I'd have to just stay at work later or use the computer lab. But mainly, I stayed at work late. There was a couple of us that did that . . . Having the little kids, they had homework, I had homework. My oldest had some issues with drugs and stuff, and so we got into a little bit of . . . That was hard, because then it was counseling and doctor appointments and needing more supervision, things like that that I needed help with that . . . I still wanted to keep going to school. That probably prolonged the process a little bit longer with having to cut back a little bit what I wanted to do to make sure they were all okay.

Kim and Juanita described making difficult choices about whether to do homework or spend time with their children, but also their growing commitment to taking classes.

> **Kim:** I had decorated this family thing [for class], and I had decorated it with my kids. I loved looking at everybody else's folders, and I had so much fun doing that. Then I'm like, "Oh, we have to write the paper, too?" We didn't just get to decorate the . . . Oh, okay. Now there's work that needs to be done . . . Oh, I've got to be like, 'Did you read the chapter last night?'" I was supposed to read the chapter?
>
> But then, that book was smaller. It wasn't as intimidating. And they were short stories, I feel like. I really liked that book . . . I'm not a super good reader. So, I was able to read that book, and it related to me. It was like a story instead of just lots of other stuff. I don't know. Some books are super hard to read, and other things are easier, and that one was pretty easy. But still, follow through [is], another thing. Do I want to hang out with my kids at home, or do I want to read this book?
>
> I probably don't want to read the book. I want to hang out with my kids. So, sometimes I would be skim reading it before class, like, "How do I get this done?" Yeah. I did not know what to expect. I didn't realize there would be that much. I thought, "Oh, oh, there's more, and I've got to put more in this little folder." The kids would be like, "What's that, mom?" And I'm like, "This is my folder." They're like, "You made that in college?" I'm like, "Yeah, I made that. Look, I picked all these pictures of us out to put on here." Then it just kind of grew with all my paperwork . . . Later then . . . [for] the next class, they're like, "You want to take a class?" It wasn't just making the folder.
>
> **Juanita:** I see my little son, "Mommy, mommy. Do you want to go with me?" During the weekend, "I want to go to the park, but I want that you walk with me." "I can't because I have a lot of homework. I need to study." "No mommy, I want that you walk with me." "Okay." Sometimes I say, "Okay, I go with you three minutes and then I return, but you need to stick with daddy." "Okay." This is little pains that I was passing with my family, but I need to continue my current work.

Beneita remembered how difficult it was to come home from class and hear about how much her daughter missed her, at the same time, she felt she was doing something for her children.

> **Beneita:** The first one was my family. My little daughter was so, so sad for me when I come back like around 11:00 in the night and my husband told me, "Oh, that my little daughter want to sleep and she hug my sandal and sleep with my

> sandals. And then she can sleep because she needs me a lot and say, "Where is my mom? When is my mom coming." And then this is the way that she can go to sleep, to take my sandal and hug my sandal. So sad for me. But inside of my head, I was thinking, I am doing something for them. Something maybe right now it's so sad, but maybe when they grow up they will understand my hard work that I did for them.

Challenges to Degree Completion. In addition to work, home and caregiving responsibilities, there were challenges in the coursework, including both the ECE classes and the general education requirements. Further, this included both the coursework itself and being able to take the required classes when they were offered. There were logistical challenges such as technology and internet connections and commuting to the college campus. As we discussed challenges, several participants also talked about wanting to do well and get good grades. For some participants this was not their first experience in college, but for the majority it was.

> **Beneita:** Another difficult thing is to try to find classes at my free time, because I was working and at home with my little three and also I take classes. Sometime I really want to take classes, but it was when I was working, or when I have something to do, because I work around 4:00 in the morning and then come in around 1:00 at my home and then make food and clean everything in the home. And then I go to the school. So hard.

> **Megan:** Obstacles? I think it goes back to time, because I missed one class on purpose the whole time I've attended [community college], and that was because it was not offered later in the day for me. Because I work in [city], and my class doesn't end until 3:00. I say goodbye to my kids at 3:00, so I can't leave until a little bit after 3:00, which means I don't even get to [city], if I'm rushing out the door, until close to 3:45. And I took a class, and it started at 3:00. That was probably one of the hardest times I had. So, I emailed [instructor] and I said, "Hey, I'm not coming in, because it's my last day with my kids, and I'm just . . . I'm sorry. I'm not coming in." And she was like, "It's okay," but she was really flexible.
>
> So, that's really the only time that I feel there was really obstacles is when face-to-face classes interrupted my work at work. Another good example of that is when I did student teaching. I was absolutely miserable the whole term. I was learning. I learned so much. But I was absolutely miserable, because we were already so low

> staffed, and I'd dedicate myself to not just my classroom but also another classroom, because we didn't have another teacher for that classroom. So, I had 40 kids and 40 families that knew me, that had a relationship with me, before I started taking student teaching.

Kim described the challenge, and sometimes frustration, of being a working student commuting to campus for classes and meetings with staff and faculty. Her day did not just consist of college classes. Her classes were often sandwiched between home visits, and attending class involved an hour commute each way.

> **Kim:** Setting that time to meet with someone to figure out what classes I need to take next, was sometimes hard. It was a lot of rescheduling, rescheduling. Going to meet with this person; they can't meet. Going to meet with that person; they can't meet. Reschedule. It wasn't like we were doing it over the phone. We had to drive in to do it. Then it wouldn't always work out . . . Or sometimes getting all the way to [community college] and having a note on the door that said, "No class today. It's been canceled." I'm like, "Oh, joy. I just drove an hour over here.". . . We were supposed to look for an email, and I didn't look for an email before I left. Things like that, those were sometimes barriers . . . Or fighting through traffic to get there.
>
> . . . I drove my own car a lot . . . You had to have gas money . . . Sometimes when I got back to work, I had to go right back into more home visits that I prepped before I left, because there was no time to prep when I got back. So, I had to have all my curriculum, all my activities ready, my backpack ready to go when I got back.

Julie has continued her education, including earning her bachelor's and master's degree and has always worked full time while going to school. Like Kim, she also recalled "juggling" work and school.

> **Julie:** I guess with my associate degree, it's a blur because I guess the most recent was working on my bachelor's and master's. That was more intense. But I've always worked full-time and juggled the coursework. It's not easy at all, but if that's the goal you have, then you find a way to do it, and you make time to do it.

Sabrina described her experience in a fully online program, which did not require the commute, but did involve other challenges.

> **Sabrina:** Being a mom, working full time. I did it online. I feel like I'm better, it was easier for me to do it online than to go to class. I focus better online, but some people are the opposite, they do well in a class setting. But for me, I know it's harder online because there's more written work. The challenge is keeping myself organized and getting things in on time.

Juanita did not receive the level of financial support for her college expenses from the Head Start Program that the other participants identified. She described how this was an added challenge.

> **Juanita:** At this time that my husband lost his job, another thing that helped me to continue was to apply for the scholarship. I used all the time the scholarship, and I won a lot. I won the scholarship for the vice-president scholarship for the college many times for the [specific college access program], for the [English language learning program].
>
> Applied to the scholarship helped me a lot because sometimes I say, "Oh my God, maybe this time I can't do that because I have no money to continue it." Okay. We apply for this scholarship, if I won, okay, I continue. If no, I need to stop and wait for the next term.
>
> Yes. This is the most difficult. The language, the economic, but I find the programs and people that tell me to continue it, especially my family, and my husband, and [specific college access program]. [English language learning program] helped me a lot, a lot.

Beneita also described the challenge of taking classes as a non-native speaker of English. She explained that she understood the instruction in English, but found completing written assignments more challenging.

> **Beneita:** Oh, the language . . . That language was so hard for me, but I was the person to speak more English [than] my three other friends. And this is that they come in over here and my son, at this time, he was the middle school, he was my teacher. He helped me. How I did my homework, because I listened and I understand what the teacher says, but I answered the question of everything in Spanish, and then translate in my bad English, and then go to my son. And my son tries to read too, and then go to [community college] or the . . . What do you say that? The person to help with the homework . . . Tutoring, yeah. I went over there and then when they correct my homework, I give to the teacher.

> Yeah, when I read it, I understand what the books say in there is most of them... My problem was to explain to the teacher to read it. Right now I have problem to read because the grammar is so hard for me. And this was a big problem.

In both focus groups, the two participants whose first language is Spanish shared more about the significant challenge of taking courses in English and the necessity of the support they received.

> **Juanita:** I'm lucky also because all my advisor are bilingual and really helped me a lot because those guys see my interest and everything. The only challenge . . . Well, not the only. One of my big challenge is my language because if you notice, my pronunciation isn't 100% correct. And when I was working and got my credits, my language wasn't good at all, nothing, zero, and it was so hard to communicate or understand things. It was awful. It was so hard for me even to do my homework or even to speak with somebody or giving my opinion, it was so hard because I can't choose to communicate with nobody. And I prefer to be silence and quiet and don't got opinion at all even that I have one just because I can't communicate good, well.
>
> . . . Sometimes, I catch up or sometimes somebody says something like, "Oh, she say something." And I say, "Oh, great," and I was the last person to laugh just because I don't understand the point of other person. Was so hard, but feel happy when the class is in Spanish because it's in my native language and I understand everything and it's easy to make homework or do things. But my second language, it was so hard at all. But my advisor, the majority that I had was bilingual. It was so easy to understand the task that I need to complete.

This exchange about the challenge of completing classes in a language that is not one's primary language took place in Focus Group Two:

> **Sabrina:** I'm in awe of you to do two languages.
>
> **Beneita:** It was so hard when I try to learn my second language. Was so difficult because I need to understand, translate, hear what the teacher say, make my homework in Spanish because [I want it to be] very clear in my homework, then translate in English. And then take one [to the] person to help me to do my translation and then give my homework. I take two days to make one page.
>
> **Kim:** . . . I remember [this assignment]. I had several girls in my class that were either Russian speaking or Spanish speaking and they would stop me after class and say, "Can I look at your [assignment]?" . . . I think sometimes it's intimidating to ask in class in front of everyone. It's easier sometimes to stop someone in

> individual and just ask . . . Because sometimes you just need to see what does it kind of look like. Just a little confusing once you kind of saw the layout, but the language barrier. I mean, I was confused. I can't imagine not having the [language]… I felt so much empathy for other people in the class that didn't speak English [as a home language] that were really struggling with that. But I always tried to help him when I, people that would ask, can I see what it looks like? I'm like, I don't even know if I'm doing it right.
>
> **Beneita:** But you know, the more I think it all, the Spanish speakers are more afraid to ask to the other Spanish speaker, because we are scared to say something and we get more support from the English speaker, this is my feeling, than from Spanish speaker. Because sometimes we don't have good pronunciation, only the Spanish speaker laughing, but the other people for me, they are respectful . . . but the others laughing and we are scared. No, I don't say nothing because I don't want everybody laughing about me.

Supports to Degree Completion. As we talked about challenges, participants also started sharing what helped them. This conversation flowed naturally to my question about who and what supported them in completing their degree. Some participants talked about the support they received form their families, often in the form of encouragement, but also in the form of help with the responsibilities they were juggling. This question also seemed to bring up how participants' families felt about them being in college.

Support from Family. Kim remembered the support she received from her mother and mother-in-law and recalled asking them for help.

> **Kim:** My mom sometimes seemed like she was proud of me, or [husband's] mom would be like, "You can keep going. You can do this," . . . I don't think she wanted me to pull on a green chain or something like she did. She wanted me to do something more, so she would be like, "Keep going. You can do this. Don't let him tell you can't do it." Because I don't know if anybody ever told her that. So, she would tell me that, and it felt good to hear her say that she thought I should go.
>
> . . . I would be like, "Please. They're sick. I'm stuck at school. Can you please go get them? [husband] cannot get there from [city]. You're in [home city]. You're the only family we have in town. Can you go get them?" And she would go get them so that I didn't have to leave school or whatever to go pick them up from school, or get them after K5, or pick them up after football practice because I'm

> not here, whatever. So, I almost kind of forget how busy it was, because it's not that busy anymore, but it was so busy. But I made it through it somehow.

Other participants also recalled support from their families, from flexibility to financial assistance.

> **Megan:** My family, because I'm very family-oriented, and I had to say a lot, "I can't do this, because I have to do homework," or "I'm not going to be home until 8:00 or 9:00 at night because I have class." So, I have a lot of family who really supported the flexibility in that, so it didn't hinder my relationships. Really happy about that. My husband, of course, just being there, being my husband, and listening to me whine when I'm tired and I don't want to do this anymore or whatever.
>
> . . . My mother is huge on the quote “education equals freedom.” I mean, she's said that to me since I was little, and she was sad that I would end up getting married and leaving after high school instead of going to a university after high school. So, the fact that she's been watching me get my degree and working and all that, ecstatic, happy about it. I'm probably the first one to graduate college on my dad's side of the family. So, they're all very excited about that. So, yeah, education's a very big value in my family.
>
> **Sabrina:** Well, my grandmother helped pay for it, and I had gone to college before, but I had to quit due to personal reasons. I had 80 credit hours and then I waited so long when I went back they only gave me 20 of those 80 credits. So I had to basically start all over . . . So my grandmother, and my husband, and my family.
>
> **Beneita:** My husband supported me a lot . . . If I don't have one person like him, I can’t do that because I take too much support from him.
>
> They [specific Head Start program], they paid for me, but my husband, my husband and my son, he was little, but he was like brought to me and say, "Look mom, you got to [go to] the school. And my aunts and my other family, they don't go to the school." And also my husband, every time when I was so frustrated. He say, "When you come in over here, you do everything that you want to do." I noticed because I started to take classes or take my licenses here, and then I start to take English classes on Saturdays, the weekends, I take my English classes and I have a lot of angels around me that helped me.

Beneita also talked about not having extended family close by for support, meaning the role of supporter primarily fell to her husband.

> **Beneita:** So over here I don't have any family coming over here. This was another thing that was so sad for me because I don't have any family over here, I really want to have only one person to stay over here close to me that was my family, but only my husband and three kids.
>
> **Julie:** Well, definitely my husband. Well, I can say I'm sitting right here in the same office that I did to get all of my degrees, and he would bring me coffee in the morning, lunch in the middle of the day, and I think I finally made it out for dinner. But he was my number one rock and supporter and cheerleader for me for that. My sisters and my mom were amazing and provided lots of encouragement too, so that's really special.

Juanita and I had this exchange about the support she received. Her husband was an important supporter, as was her sister. Juanita also participated in a program at her community college that offered advising and other resources in Spanish, her primary language.

> **Juanita**: My husband support me a lot, and [specific college access program] support me a lot. My sister call me, "How are you?" "I'm tired. I'm thinking. I can't do that." "No, no. You can do it. You can do it." All these people tell me to tell me, "You can do it. You can do it." I say, "Okay, I can do it," and I can do it.
>
> **R:** You did do it. You did.
>
> **Juanita:** I did it. I did it.

Support from Head Start. Participants emphasized the support they received from their employer, Head Start. In most cases, this included paying for all or some of their coursework, presenting the opportunity or encouraging them to attend classes, and support from supervisors or colleagues. In more than one instance, a particular person was mentioned by name. The following reflections describe the many different ways participants experienced this support.

> **Gabriella:** I just couldn't think of a better place to work. Like I said, everyone was so supportive and it got to the point where people were working around it and no one ever complained about it or made me feel bad because like, “Gabriella has

> a meeting at school on Friday, we have to work around this.” I'm like, "Thanks guys."
>
> Just having the opportunity to go to school and I mean, there is no way I ever could have paid for that on my own. I mean, I could have if I would have worked another two or three jobs. But it was just having the opportunity to get my associate degree and to graduate.
>
> Everyone at Head Start was great about it. It took a lot of people to cover those classes when I wasn't going to be there. There were some Fridays where I had an oral communication class, and I had these meetings and helping out with the classroom and it took everybody at the school to really be part of getting me out there. And there is [staff member] in human resources, and I've gone to her for everything. I almost feel like she's my second mom even though she's younger than me. But anytime I had a problem with school or I needed something covered or . . . She's on the training committee and the training committee is what would approve our funding for our degree.

Juanita and Sabrina also recalled being able to complete class assignments at their Head Start sites or even earn practicum credit there.

> **Juanita:** Also, I ask from my supervisor. I even say, "I'm taking this class, and I listen these things in the class. Can I work with these children about this topic?" "Oh yeah, you can do it." For example, when I need some assignments that I need to take pictures, that I need this formula too because I have everything in my hands ready. I say, "Oh, I need to take a little video with looking at teacher doing this specific activity." Okay, only I need to see the permission for the parents that can do it and say, "Okay, only for children that you can take pictures, that's fine."
>
> . . . I have the opportunity to use these tools that I have in my place work to use in my school. This is something that helped me a lot too. That I have the support of my supervisors to do all these assignments . . . This helped me a lot. Yes.
>
> **Sabrina:** And also [Head Start program] they paid for some of the classes after you received your grade. If you got a C or higher they would reimburse you a bit. And then I was able to do my practicums in the class, but for the morning class, if that makes sense. There's the AM and PM class so I was able to do my practicum in like the morning class.

Participants emphasized the importance of the financial support they received from Head Start. In most cases Head Start paid for tuition and often paid for the participants’ books.

Julie and I talked about this financial support.

> **Julie:** . . . the agency paid for our college classes and reimbursed us for our books and things like that. As far as out-of-pocket expense, I didn't really have any, so that was good.
>
> **R:** How big of an impact do you think that had on you, [the] financial piece from Head Start?
>
> **Julie:** Huge . . . I don't know if I could have afforded it any other way. So yeah, that was very beneficial, and especially when Head Start put the mandate to have a bachelor's degree. Oh, wow. That would have been really spendy.
>
> . . . they were very supportive, like I said, financially. No time was allowed at all at work to do any type of reading or anything like that. Everything was on your own time. That was when I was working on my associate degree.

Megan completed some courses prior to her employment with Head Start, and she talked about the difference between paying for her own courses versus having Head Start pay.

> **Megan:** The financial aspect was totally gone, which was really, really exciting once I started at Head Start. There really wasn't any barriers once I started college and had that paid for. Yeah, it was time consuming. Yeah, it was different. But I was never not able to just do it. Nothing stopped me from going to school. Nothing stopped me from doing my homework. Again, I don't have children. Might have been different. Because the flexibility is there, the support is there, and the money aspect is gone.

As did others, Megan also recalled co-workers and supervisors who checked in with her or pointed out resources.

> **Megan:** I've had a really good team my first year, and then the team switched up, but everybody understood that I've got to go, I've got to go to class, I've got to go do homework. My supervisors were always wonderful and let me know what you can and can't . . . "We're paying for your college. You can use our paper," or "Oh, don't forget to put your mileage down, and you get paid for going to school." And I'm like, "Oh, great." Then of course administration, constantly checking in on me like, "How was class? How was term?"

Sabrina talked about how and why she felt Head Start supported her. She tied the support to the education mandates the programs face.

> **Sabrina:** I feel like they really did well. They need their teachers to have [the associate degree] at least. So they want to support you any way they can to get, I

> mean because of like government requirements . . . So they need to support you in that. They want to keep qualified teachers so they were very, very supportive I think . . . Like doing my practicums with them in the classroom, and I feel like that was in total support because I felt like I'm going to have a lot of anxiety and I have to go somewhere else to do it, and so I felt like that was a very supportive.

The following exchange between Cathy and me during her interview is about how she started taking classes.

> **R:** So how long had you worked at Head Start when you started taking classes?
>
> **Cathy:** Not even year. I started in the fall, I would say either winter or spring term.
>
> **R:** So you started working and then somebody said, "You can take a class" or something like that?
>
> **Cathy:** Yes, [and] we're paying for it.
>
> **R:** And was your son in Head Start at the time?
>
> **Cathy:** Yes and both my boys are in Head Start.
>
> **R:** Who started Head Start first, him or you?
>
> **Cathy:** Him. No. Wow. It was him. He was three.
>
> **R:** So he started then you got hired?
>
> **Cathy:** Yes.
>
> **R:** Then not very long after somebody said, "Come take a class?"

Cathy went on to talk about the financial resources and emotional support from Head Start staff she received, emphasizing how important it was to her.

> **Cathy:** There was no way I would have ever done it. No way. I mean even trying for financial aid, I didn't know anything about the paperwork and I was a timid person way back then. Very quiet and shy and I had a hard time asking for help, so I just wouldn't do it. And if it wasn't for them I wouldn't be here with my degree.

> Couple of the people aren't around anymore. I know [name], she was a family educator at Head Start and she empowered me so much. She just could tell me what I should do or needed to do. She was real encouraging and like a cheerleader.
>
> . . . she'd been there for years and she was my advocate [the] first two years and she worked there and she would still see me and even support me. She was like a second mother really. And other people in the agency were very encouraging and they treated people, I feel as family and we're all one. It's not just the families we work with, but we are all important.

Beneita shared that she was in a group of *four amigas* who took classes together and how they worked together on homework, with Beneita often taking the lead.

> **Beneita:** . . . we worked together, but most of the time they come in with me because they think that I have more tools to help them.
>
> **R:** So you were their support if I was interviewing them?
>
> **Beneita:** That was my feeling because they come in and my home and everything they want, I check the homework and say, "What do you think Beneita?" And I said, "According to my son, this is done." And we did this, but I think they support me like a company or something like that. But most things that I think they come in to take support from me.
>
> **R:** You were giving the support.
>
> **Beneita:** Yeah. Because I have something that I want to help the people. I think I want to help the people. I like. I have something, what can I give to you? If I have some I can share with you something like that.

Kim and Megan both emphasized the importance of the financial support they received from Head Start.

> **Kim:** I felt thankful to them, because that was over $10,000 in education that they paid for me. I don't owe anything for that. They supported me 100%.
>
> I made the [Head Start employer] cards with a picture of me graduating and telling them that I was the first one out of my family to graduate from any kind of college.
>
> **Megan:** . . . college was handed to me once I was here for a little while. It was. Which doesn't happen in my social class as far as financial . . . I didn't grow up . . . I didn't even grow up middle class really. I was barely middle class. We didn't

> have a lot of money. Single parent household. So, that's everything. Yeah. It was great. I mean, it was.

Most participants were not aware of a particular requirement to continue working for their Head Start organization, but that was not Beneita's experience. Here she described the added stress of knowing she could have to pay Head Start back for tuition if she did not pass her classes.

> **Beneita:** . . . Yeah, they pay all things. Also, they are very strict. They pay, but we need to pass all the classes. If you don't pass the classes, you don't have more opportunity to continue to be a student and then you need to pay back the money . . . So it's another thing that I was so stressed, I put everything that I have to try to pass my classes because you know my dream was to finish. Also, I need to pay back the money.

Support from Early Childhood Faculty. In addition to the support from their families and from Head Start, participants also talked about the support they received from the early childhood education program faculty. Some participants talked about faculty support when I asked about how they knew they could complete their degree. Participants often mentioned individual faculty members by name. Cathy remembered how both community college faculty and Head Start staff supported her during a challenging time and what this support meant to her.

> **Cathy:** Well, I did go through a lot of ups and downs. I mean, my story prior to Head Start and that doing drugs and that it stopped, but then it continued . . . I ended up going to a treatment center, Head Start encouraged me and a couple of them came to visit me in treatment place. [Community college early childhood instructor] even allowed me to turn in some things prior or after the date. I got marked down. But that meant a lot to me because it wasn't, "You're fired, you know, you're done. You got to make this class up." They were there and that's a big, big piece in my experience with Head Start. There's not many people around that know about it and I'm not ashamed of it because I wouldn't be where I am today if this stuff didn't happen. I wouldn't be sitting here. So that was a big impact in my life. So they didn't discard me. That happens in a lot of different places or work or school.

Gabriella: I know I've mentioned her already, but [faculty member], she's such an inspiration because you can just talk to her about anything and she really gives a lot of reflective learning and I really appreciated that because I feel like I'm always on the go and to really stop and reflect and go, okay, that's great. I have time for that. And it's a good program, it's a great program. I'm glad I went through it. There was times where I definitely wanted to quit, not because it was difficult or anything, but with my busy schedule and then having to work all day and then run over there for an hour and 15 minutes and then rush back.

Beneita: I have one teacher that I remember. I lose her. I don't know where she is, but one teacher that was supporting me a lot. I have a good experiences to her. I remember one time when I don't have money to buy my books. She say, "What kind of books do you need?" Because I need some homework. And she say, "Beneita, do you do your homework?" And I say, "Not really. But I go to take copies today, to take copies of some of [my friend's] book. And then I go to make my homework." And she say, "You don't get your books?" And I say, "No, the next week I got to take my check and then I go to [get] my books."

Then I got to do my homework. "Sure I go to do my homework," I told her. And she said, "What is the book. I am curious, what is the book that you need?" And then I say the name of the book. And then later in my break she called me and say, "Beneita come." And I went over there and she said, "You don't have the excuse to not do your homework," and gave me the books. It was so nice. I said, "Oh no." I cried. I said, "No, I have money, when I get my check, I have money to buy my books." And she said, "No don't be mad about because I looked to report this and my taxes and it's okay, this helped me too." She say, and she buys books for me. And every time say, "You can't see how much potential do you have, but I can see you can do that." And she gave me a lot of support also when I take my citizenship over here, she helped me. she said, "Come over here for free, I go to get classes," and she support me lot . . . This is a very big angel I have.

Megan: [Faculty member] again really helped get all of my credits transferred in . . . So, that was really nice. So, an advisor's probably the biggest one. Stick to an advisor is a great idea. You'll get your degree done if you keep in contact with your [faculty] advisor. And I did, every term.

Kim: Because the [faculty] at the [community college] told me I could do it. They said, "You can do it. I know you can do it. You're almost there. Look. Look at all these classes you took. Look at all these."

When they offered the classes in [city], that made it so much easier for us to not have the two hours, because that's two hours by the time you go there and back. That helped.

> **Julie:** I didn't. I didn't believe in myself. Nope. Nope, I didn't. I would guess it would be all of the instructors that believed in me. And I remember questioning myself. I guess I wanted to say it to them. How did you know I could do it? How did you know I could do it? That's what I wanted to say to them, because I didn't think I could. So I guess it was like I said, just reaching one milestone at a time. Then it starts to build your self-esteem, and it makes you realize that you can do more, and you can do anything you set your mind out to do.

When I asked Julie what it was that made her think the instructors believed in her, she replied with her memory of an instructor who progressively provided more and more feedback as she saw Julie gaining confidence.

> **Julie:** They gave me the feedback. They gave me the positive feedback frequently. And I guess I can remember this too, from that one instructor I was telling you about, my very first scary class I took. I had very poor writing skills going in there. She wouldn't make comments on my writing at all, until as we got near the end of the class. Then she'd always give me positive feedback on whatever I did.
>
> Whatever type of paper I turned in, she'd give me positive feedback. And then as she knew that I was feeling more comfortable, I'm sure that then she started guiding me along. Maybe circling something that might have not been spelled right, or saying, "Maybe I don't understand this part, could you clarify?" Little things like that, but she made it a very comfortable learning environment for me.

Juanita remembered her instructor encouraging her during a class presentation when she was nervous about people being able to understand her English and instructors encouraging her to apply for scholarships.

> **Juanita:** When I started school, I did the CDAs. This school helped me a lot. It opened my mind a lot. Even was difficult by the language especially when I need to pass in front and have any class that I need to make a presentation is because I don't have the inner confidence . . . Maybe they don't understand me. I was thinking and was frustrated.
>
> When I start talking and the teacher gave me a signal that I was doing good, that they understand me, I feel more comfortable and I continue with it. When I saw my grades, and I have good grades, I say, "Oh, I can do that. I can do that." Sometimes I feel, "Oh, maybe I can do that. I don't know if I want to do this because sometimes I need to read five times one unit because I need to translate some words that I don't understand.

> **Juanita:** This is something that a teacher told us, "If you don't win one time, the next time, apply because one day you will." I get a lot, many of these scholarships I won. When you get this, you feel very good. You feel support.
>
> **Cathy:** . . . people were encouraging. They said you can do this and it's going to be hard. Being realistic but yet being so supportive, and if it wasn't for the people, I definitely wouldn't have done it. Even the teachers, because they were encouraging and I didn't know people like that. I wasn't around people who were so positive and encouraging and so as I met them, it just really made an impact and to know you're being encouraged or you're valued as a person.

Sabrina experienced faculty support in the online environment in the form of her instructors interacting with and responding to her. She also noted the social interactions with peers.

> **Sabrina:** I had a lot of interaction with my teachers. There was like probably about three main teachers that taught early childhood online and they're very responsive and very helpful when I needed it and I didn't have any trouble. I love the school actually. And then I got the social [part] with this students through the group chats . . . and we've had to post discussion posts all the time.

In the focus group, Cathy reiterated the value of the support she received from both Head Start and early childhood education program faculty.

> **Cathy:** I was a parent, I was going to school, I was working. The advocate that I had that came to my home to do home visits. They were amazing. So encouraging. And then the support I got, I want to say that really meant the [most to] me was from the instructors at [community college] . . . I get emotional thinking about it because they made a big impact in my life. And if it wasn't for their encouragement . . . I would've had to have dropped because I couldn't finish them or want to at that time. But yeah, it's the people and my family of course, but you know what, it's mostly the instructors at [community college] that really were a support for me.

Cluster #3: The College Experience

I asked the participants about how they felt being a college student. It was common for references to age or the perceived “traditional” college experience to come up. In general, while there was some nervousness or apprehension, participants described

themselves as having a sense of purpose and empowerment. Participants talked about some of the younger students in their classes and the how their experiences were different.

> **Juanita:** How [should I] word this? That I need to work hard to get that I want because sometimes the other students [are] young students. They go to school, and they don't read the assignments and I say, "Why? You have everything." Because I ask them, "You paid for school?" "No. My parents paid for me." "You need to work for your parents. They will help you." "Yeah, but I'm okay."
>
> When I saw this young ladies or boys, "You have the language. You have everything." I said, "No. I remember when I was young too. I understand you too because at this age, we want to, I don't know, parties or something and everything. When you at this age, when you are adult and to think that you can lose your time. Then, you need to get the right time to . . ." I forgot the word to use for this, but to go to school at this time was more even the language was difficult for me and the economic, but the mentality helped a lot because you can lose your time to go school if you don't get the right way.
>
> I say, "No. I'm here. My family's back and my children is alone with other people's care. They care them, and I'm here." I need to focus in this because I can, "Oh, I am going this today, and tomorrow I don't feel to go school. No." Sometimes even I was sick, I don't feel well, I need to be present because my family is behind me. They are supporting me. I need to be working hard and finish because they are supporting me.
>
> **Beneita:** I was so excited because all time I want to learn, learn things about almost anything. But when I have the opportunity to go to the college. Wow. I can take [this and] also I can pay nothing . . . And it was exciting.
>
> **Gabriella:** Actually, I wasn't the oldest person there so I didn't feel like I was the grandma trying to be hip in the classroom. It was fun. I mean, I like going to school, I love being organized and it was fun. I like being a student.
>
> **Kim:** I never got to experience college like that. Friends I went to high school with went on to [university], and then I was like, "Wow, that's what college is? I went to [community college]." I'm like, "Well, this isn't like that. They're just in these individual modular building things," or we'd be in [satellite campus] and doing it just in a room there . . . or at an old Head Start or something. So, it wasn't like feeling like I was going to some big place, until I realized . . . You can do more here. That's an art show, and there's all these things.

I asked Sabrina if she felt comfortable with her peers in her online classes.

> **Sabrina:** Yeah, I think I did. Yeah. I'm trying to think back, we had discussions and discussion groups, some things like that and they felt comfortable with them. I know a lot of them were a lot younger than me and I felt like I was at a higher level. Just [cognitively]. Just my answers were more thought out and things like that. But, yeah, I felt comfortable.
>
> **Megan:** I didn't get that experience that 18-year-olds get, where they just get to go and be young at a university. I didn't get that. My view was "Just do it so you can get it done," because I needed it to be happy, is kind of where my brain was. So, it was stressful. I appreciated the relationships I had . . . I didn't get to really make a bunch of friendships and have fun with it. It was mostly I enjoyed the learning aspect of it, and that's kind of what I just really focused on was learning things and being able to apply it in my classroom. So, it was overwhelming and stressful, but also I learned a lot, and I appreciate that, but I probably wouldn't do it again, because it was a lot for me. It wasn't an ecstatic time.

Some participants felt intimidated or fearful when they first took a class. Beneita, Julie, and Cathy discussed some of their initial apprehension.

> **Beneita:** I was so scared, but also I was excited because there's something that you really want, but I say I got to enroll in the classes, but how I go to take my classes? I don't know I was there, but I don't know.
>
> **Julie:** . . . I was really late starting, really late starting. Probably, to get the whole understanding of it would be that I had my first child when I was 16 years old, and I never finished high school the traditional way. So I actually went to night school and got an adult high school diploma through [community college].
>
> I finished that when I was probably 16, I suppose or 17, I don't remember for sure. But it was . . . oh, gosh, it would have been probably 20 years later. No, maybe 19 years later when I went to school for the very first time, to college. And oh my goodness, that was a frightening experience. I remember walking into that college for the very first time and it was very frightening.
>
> **Cathy:** Well, it was . . . intimidating because I had no knowledge. I mean it's like, "Okay, you're paying for my school, I'm going to go, but I don't know what I'm doing." And some of the struggles was that I was older. I was 30 when I first started going back to school. And so that I was older, even though I really wasn't because 30 isn't that old . . . So it was the age and trying to fit in because I knew I didn't feel 30, I felt younger. So that was difficult even.

I asked Cathy if that feeling changed over time. She was taking one class each term, and recalled it taking nearly 10 years to feel comfortable and worthy of the experience.

> **Cathy:** It did. It took a while. It really did. I mean I probably was in school at least 10 years and I was starting to like, "Okay, you know what? I am so worth it and I'm valuable and you know what? This is a really great opportunity for me to be able to go back and learn and share what I've learned with others."

Kim talked at different points in the interview about age, what it was like to go to college, and some of the ways in which college was different from high school.

> **Kim:** So, at the end, it was nice to kind of see where I was going, but then I thought, "Man, if I could have redone it, it would have been nice to have done it if I would have been 18, right out of high school, and I could have just went through the motions the way it was. It would have all kind of lined out a little bit different. But still, it was all good.
>
> I was super nervous . . . My parents never once said anything about us going to college ever. And so, I never even . . . It didn't cross my mind. Even when I heard kids at high school talking about it, I don't remember me even thinking. I just knew I wanted to be a mom. I was going to get married. I was still with my boyfriend I'd had forever, so I thought, "Oh, I'll just get married and have kids, and that's just what you do."
>
> So, when I did go to college, I thought, "Well, this is different." I really liked it, because it wasn't . . . I was in there with people that were . . . I was like, what, probably 24 or 25, and I was in there with 40-year-old, 50-year-old women and men, and people were eating food. I was like, "What?" And nobody cared if I showed up or left. I was like, "What?" So, it was kind of like, "Oh my gosh. This is because people want to be here, not because you're made to be here." It was definitely like, "This is all on me," more than high school. High school, you beg for forgiveness . . . [or] your mom's like, "You have to go."
>
> My parents divorced when I was like 14, so I was just raised by my dad the rest of the time, and so I really had kind of grown up a little bit more doing that. I kind of already felt like I was sort of being a mom to him and taking care of everything. But this felt like . . . I think I felt a responsibility that the [Head Start employer] was paying for me to go there too, and it wasn't even . . . It would have been the same if it was my own money probably too. I would have felt like, "Gosh, I put all this money into it. I better put my effort into it too."
>
> **Beneita:** . . . the younger people . . . I notice is sometime they don't want to be in us group because we are old. We don't know nothing about them. Sometime there's something that was sad. Something sometimes hard because they don't know. But then when they saw that we passed the classes on sometime they don't pass the classes and I am thinking, "Oh, okay. We can, we are in the good way."

> [It] was so hard. I tell the co-worker . . . There was other students that they come in and they sit down over there and read the paper very fast and give to the teacher at the time that they are at the school. I was so frustrated. I said, "Oh, I can't do that, this is so terrible for me." I spent almost all my nights, sometimes I spend all night talking on the phone, trying to make the homework.

During the focus group, Gabriella recalled this experience when she felt more comfortable in a class that she took with primarily Head Start peers.

> **Gabriella:** There was one class where I knew about 70% of the students. They were other Head Start employees and I felt so comfortable and so good in that class like I could speak up and say anything. There's a lot of classes where we did group work and I did not like that because then you're working with strangers, which I know is what happens in the real life. But when you're working with all these people that you know and trust, and you're like, "Okay, I got this. I can participate and feel good about it and not so self-conscious."

When I asked Focus Group Two if they wanted to add anything to what they said about being a college student, it led to this conversation about how it boosted their confidence.

> **Kim:** When she was talking about things making an impact, I was maybe thinking, all the things I got to go do [in the community college program], I went to [local child care]. I went to the [university program], I think. And then also to some [other local] schools, I think being able to see, when you're going into this field and you're already working for Head Start, you kind of maybe have tunnel vision a little bit. This is what all schools are kind of like, and then growing up in a small town, and just seeing the diversity and how other schools are. I really enjoyed that part of being able to do that. Because I always had in my head, wow, in [city], their playground is like downtown, where we're in a field out here, it's just so different.
>
> **. . .** I really enjoyed it. I really liked being a college student . . . When I was in high school, it was cliquey and the teachers were like all . . . about you being there on time. Then when you go to college, it's your money, it's your time, it's your thing. And there were people that were fresh out of high school and then there was 50-year-old grandmas that were in there, and everybody was there because they wanted to be there. So it was really nice to feel like, or just kind of have that many different people coming in and then getting to experience all those experiences there too. I do miss it.
>
> **Sabrina:** I feel like for me, it was a self-esteem booster because I kind of found myself during that time. And because I dropped out of school when I was, I think I was in the ninth grade, I dropped out and then I went back, I got my GED. And

> then I did my first round of college that I never got all the credits for. Anyway, but I feel like it just really boosted my self-esteem and who I was. And so, for me, I feel like it was a great experience. So even though it was difficult . . .
>
> **Beneita:** Difficult, yeah . . .
>
> **Cathy:** I had big time low self-esteem and I would just beat up myself mentally, but being at [community college], I felt, okay. I'm kind of older than a lot of the people, which was kind of hard, but then it was like, this is good. I can do this. And it did, like Sabrina said, it did impact my confidence in doing different things and my self-esteem.

Being in the Community College Early Childhood Education Program. In addition to being college students, the participants were all part of Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs. In talking about how it felt to be in these programs, some of the responses expanded upon or revisited topics we had touched on such as age or feeling apprehensive. Participants recalled that they were beginning to connect and utilize the early childhood content they were learning with the children and families in their Head Start program.

> **Julie:** Oh, my gosh, I've loved every minute of it. …I don't know if it's just the love of learning, or it's just more of my passion, or I just want to help children and teachers. My work now is mainly with the teachers so I really want to help them do best for children and families. So gosh, I love learning for one thing. I love learning.
>
> **Juanita:** Working and going to school was very interesting because when I was working with the children, I make another notes, questions. When I will return at school, I made these questions to my teacher. "Okay, I have this situation, and I tried to do this. I don't know if the way is the correct way or I made mistakes. Can you help me or explain me what I need to do? What I can do to help the child?"
>
> The whole story that was happening with a specific child, and the teachers helped me a lot. "You can talk with this way with the child. You can make this with the child." All my assignments was about the children I was working. That was the experiences that I was working in my classroom…This helped a lot because when I received the feedback from the teachers, I can practice these feedbacks with my class, with the children.

> **Cathy:** . . . in the beginning and I would go in the classroom and it'd be like, "Oh, okay. He talked about this or she said that. And that's what I'm seeing." I mean, it took a while and it wasn't right away, but even the classes like music, it was like, now I know what I'm doing, why I'm doing it. It's not just to sing songs, but it's to build literacy, to build language. And the classes like [about guiding children] was like, those were really difficult for me. But once I later on got to do the observing more in depth, it started to connect and it started to build me up. It's like, "Oh, okay, I learned this, now I know what I'm doing in this part."
>
> **Beneita:** I have some easy too because when I work for Head Start was easy for me to make like connection with the classes, because I know I learned how the children grow up and how the brain develops . . . and I understand very well and the classes and the [community college] support me with the knowledge that I take from the Head Start is something that helped me to give the quality helped the children when they need it.
>
> And I think the best for me is how I can help the families and children. This is something that I be proud on. I can help because I learned this way how I can help, especially when we have children who need it. So I say, "Oh, when I went to the [community college], the teacher say, or this book say that we can help the brain of the children work like that or maybe I can help you and try to look for another tool for the families." And I enjoy that. Or you will see the progress of the children. And when I start to do something, and this is something very, very exciting for me. I think I really, really enjoy.

Cathy also commented on bringing what she learned in her coursework to her work in Head Start in Focus Group Two.

> **Cathy:** For me, I enjoyed going to class learning all kinds of stuff and going to work using it and not experimenting, but yeah, it was really uplifting to know that, yeah, I'm learning this and it's really working and I'm having fun with it.

Learning at the Community College. When asked about how they learned best, participants brought up their interactions with other students, particular faculty, and even specific assignments. The participants frequently brought up online versus in-person classes when I asked about their learning. Participants tended to have a preference, although not necessarily the same preference. No participants shared examples of hybrid or synchronous remote courses, a format that has emerged so prominently during the

COVID-19 pandemic. I also asked if participants were ready for the courses they took, which often brought up general education coursework, most specifically, math.

> **Gabriella:** I would say on my own because they love giving us group work at [community college] and I do not like group work. So I would say on my own. Just give me the assignment, tell me what I need to read, what I need to do and I will read it, do it and then . . . What's the word I'm looking for? Taking [in] that information.
>
> I did have one teacher, [faculty member], and it was a diversity class and I loved learning about all the different . . . I mean, I grew up in a very diverse place and of course I thought I knew everything, but [she] would just introduce us to so many new things we didn't know about and things to learn about, and I thought that was great. Just learning all the new, not diverse issues, but there was just a lot of things I wasn't aware of.
>
> **Juanita:** This formula, working with children and go to school at the same time, I can do my homework better. I understand better. Even when I need to read the lessons was a little difficult for the language, but this helped me a lot, a lot, a lot.
>
> **Julie:** Well, probably the best experiences I had, and it could . . . man, I've had so many great ones. Basically, through hands-on learning, hands-on learning. I had the most magnificent instructor at [community college] who introduced me to the field. And she was just out of this world. So on target with her theories and practices, and they stand true to time still.
>
> So she brought things to life for us and a lot of hands-on opportunities to practice and try things, and make all the hands-on materials that we would need, how to build our teacher resources and things like that. We were taught you had a good toolbox of resources when you go in to teach. So she was an out of this world instructor.
>
> . . . [she] really stood out to me as far as being really great at hands-on and helping learning come to life. Especially helping me get over the fear of a first time college student at whatever age I was. I don't know how old I was. I probably wasn't really that old, but I wasn't right out of high school, either.

Beneita recalled feeling comfortable in small groups, so I asked her if she spoke English or Spanish in the small groups. She explained that the groups were comprised of English and Spanish speakers, but she was still comfortable speaking to the smaller groups

> **Beneita:** In the small groups, most of the time, one to one or small groups, this is the best, because I have a comfortable feeling to express with my bad words or my words was not correct. So I be more comfortable and then express and I have tried to express the things that I think… I was speak Spanglish most of the time, because the teacher was awesome at the college and they mixed groups, some were speaking Spanish and some they speak English like this and different language, but they tried to put them in mixed groups.

Megan talked about specific assignments and what they meant to her.

> **Megan:** The first time I made a lesson plan, and they actually made us do it from scratch. We had to make our own template, and it was my first time using Excel, and I absolutely hated every second of it. But ‘til this day, I am proud of that lesson plan. It's beautiful. If I was ever to run my own childcare facility, that would be the template that I use. It's my standard.

Online Classes. When I asked about their learning, the online modality often came up. If they hadn’t already mentioned it on their own, I asked each participant if they had taken classes online because this format is often considered an ideal option for working adult learners. Participants discussed their experience with and preferences about online learning.

> **Megan:** [One community college] was online, so my instructors weren't really inspiring. I mean, that sounds mean, but I didn't have a relationship, because it was "Turn in your work. Okay. Turn in your work. Okay." Then [different community college] was way more personal, because everything was face to face, which is probably one of the main benefits of face to face, to me.

Despite this, when asked about her preference, Megan explained that she preferred online classes.

> **Megan:** Well, gosh, that's a hard one, because I learn in all kinds of ways. I'm a very visual person, so I prefer online, because if I can read it and I can watch a video of it and just take notes, it sticks in my brain a lot. But face to face is great too, because I still get that visual as well. So, as long as I'm not just sitting here listening to a recording, I'm learning really, really good. I prefer online though, because I like to have control over my schedule. I love having my own . . . It's just a control thing. I like to know what I'm doing and knowing that, okay, I can read on this day, and I don't have to worry about being late to something, and after

> working you're exhausted, and any of that. So, online is my favorite. I'm a very visual learner, so that's how I learn best.
>
> **Cathy:** I had to have an instructor. Nowadays it's online and I won't take a class because it's online. I need to be talked to. I need a person physically in front teaching me and being able to explain things to me in my terms, because back then I again didn't have a knowledge and if it was all this talking, say big words, I wouldn't have gotten it. And especially [faculty member], I remember him. He was the fun one and he made it fun. So the instructors way back then I remember some of them and just having them there, hands on work, that was big for me. I'm not a book reader and go and read this chapter, come back, we're going to have a test. That's really difficult for me, but a lot of hands on and individual contact.

Sabrina's program was fully online. She reflected on how she learned in this modality and explained why it worked well for her.

> **Sabrina:** Through reading and although I am kind of a hands-on learner to like visual, and hands-on, but from going to college the first time I didn't do as well as doing it online. I feel like online, really focused me more.
>
> . . . there [were] things in the online courses that met that need to learn hands-on or did you just kind of set that aside and there were other things about online that worked well for you?
>
> I didn't miss anything. So when I'm in a regular classroom, and the teacher's talking and there's distractions and I probably have a little bit of ADD . . . So, I would miss a lot of stuff that would occur. So I think that having it all right there online and you don't miss it. If that makes sense.

Juanita experienced the differences between her learning and interactions with instructors in online versus face-to-face classes.

> **Juanita:** This way, working with the children. When I feel frustrated because even I remember, "Oh, the teacher say this, this, this. Okay, I'm trying, but I'm not working." Okay. I make my notes, my observations . . . I come back to school. I ask the teacher, "This happen with this child, and I did this but this don't give me a lot. What I need to change?" Then this is how I learn most.
>
> . . . usually I like take classes in person, and start with the person because when sometimes only two times I take online classes. I like more in person because you have the opportunity to do the whole questions at the moment. In this moment, the teacher asks all these questions and you can use all these feedback that you receive at the moment.

> That when I take the online classes, I send my question to the teacher. I receive this response to the next class and sometimes I need to wait a little bit because the class is only one time a week and wait a little bit more. The other way, the person-to-person, even I don't have class with this teacher. I call the teacher and say, "Can I [please] ask something about a situation that I have at school?" She say, "Okay, you can," and was in person. I learn more person-to-person than classes online.

The participants had different experiences and challenges with online learning.

Gabriella's college used the learning management system, Moodle. She was the only participant who discussed their college's platform specifically.

> **Gabriella:** It's funny, every year I did Moodle, maybe every semester and each time it was still an enigma to me. So actually, when you ask about difficulties, it's Moodle.
>
> I think I'm pretty savvy when it comes to technology and Moodle, there's just something about it where I think it's way more complicated than it has to be. There's just so many different places you can go to and there's way too many links that you don't even need. And for me, Moodle, that was my obstacle . . . And once I got back into that swing and the hang of Moodle, it was totally fine, but it was always that beginning part of figuring it out. I'm like, am I really that untechnical? But I know that I'm not. So just Moodle.

I asked Gabriella if she enjoyed online learning and, despite the challenges, she did.

> **Gabriella:** Definitely. And I liked Moodle, like I said, once I got the hang of it. It takes a certain, you really have to get into the flow of Moodle and it reminds me of the seeing eye pictures where once you get and you're like, yeah, now I can see all the pictures. And that's what Moodle's like. Once you get it, you're like, okay, now I get it. Now, this is fun.
>
> **Cathy:** . . . it was a very [early] online class. I don't know how long, many years ago . . . and I had to talk to people or email them, and I didn't do very good. [The instructor] was still learning, so bless her heart she had some leeway on stuff. So otherwise I didn't do very well on it. I mean, I don't think I did because I didn't quite understand it and I wasn't with people and I'm typing to people, I don't know. And that's the only one I ever did.
>
> **Sabrina:** Being a mom, working full time. I did it online. I feel like I'm better, it was easier for me to do it online than to go to class. I focus better online, but some people are the opposite, they do well in a class setting. But for me, I know it's

harder online because there's more written work. The challenge is keeping myself organized and getting things in on time.

Preparedness and the Math Requirement. As discussed in Chapter 2, the literature indicates that adult learners may not be what their college considers academically prepared for college-level work. I asked the participants if they were ready for the classes they took. The responses to this question tended to lead to discussion of the general education coursework. Math came up consistently as something they did not feel confident about.

> **Megan:** Not math. I wasn't ready for math. I actually did not pass [at first]. Yeah. So, I had to take developmental classes. I had to take two developmental classes before I could take the class that actually was towards my degree, and I didn't pass it. So, I learned math online is not for me . . . and I was able to pass it [in a face-to-face class]. And I got an A, which was shocking.
>
> Besides that, I felt ready for the other classes. Not the first day. Because once I have the syllabus, I feel a lot better. Once I have the syllabus, I have my checklist right there handed to me, and I feel a lot better like, "Okay. Okay." Then I transfer my syllabus onto a calendar, and this is the day I'm going to do this, this is when I'm going to do this. So, for me, I was able to do that, because besides work, I had time.
>
> **Sabrina:** The whole thing [was] online, well except for Math, I did Math up at the local college here . . . That's my biggest fear is Math. So I ended up pulling off an "A" so I don't [know].
>
> **Julie:** Those [general education courses] were a little bit more scary . . . they were out of my realm of comfort. Some of those at the very beginning, I just had no idea what I was getting into. So it was like the very first day I walked into the ECE class, which I took all of those first before I took any of the other requirements. I do remember I loved my psychology class, go figure. But the math and the English, that was scary. I was not comfortable, and I believe I struggled in those. They were not easy. So no, I wasn't prepared for those.
>
> **Juanita:** [It was] difficult when I need to start with a new class. For example, when I was in high school, I was [not] good in math. Then when I start to taking math class, that was the last classes that I take because I was scary to take math and say, "Oh my God, math." It was my . . . No, I was surprised with myself but also I have a good, good teacher that she helped me a lot in this. I told her, "I

> scare because I don't good in math. All the time when I was in high school math, I need to repeat one year for math. I'm scary with this math." "Oh, don't worry. I will help you. Math is easy."
>
> The first class, it was the Math 20 . . . Even my language in English was a second language, she was very clear. You know that when you pay attention, all that she explain, it was so clear and say, "Oh, that's not too difficult." I was surprised by myself because all these classes I passed with A. I can't believe it, passed math with A.
>
> **Kim:** Writing I took probably in the maybe earlier to the mid, but I think I had to take two . . . But I think I took them at the [Head Start employer] from the same [instructor], and she was helpful. Now, math . . . was further down the road, and that I wasn't really prepared for, because I hadn't done math for a long time. So, I think I did Math 60 and Math 70, and I have to have a little bit of tutoring with that . . . They got me through it, and I passed it.

As with the interviews, I did not initiate the topic of math in the focus groups, and yet it came up again. For some, completing math was connected to finishing their degree. Others recalled again that they were nervous about math or that it was challenging for them. Both Juanita and Beneita recalled that math was easier for them than their other classes. Focus Group One had this conversation about math:

> **Gabriella:** For me it was when I took my last math class. I was like, "this is the last math class I have to take for my degree, [I'm] in the homestretch."
>
> **Megan:** I passed it . . . and I not only passed it, I got a really good grade and I'm like, "How did I go from that to that?" It was amazing…I'm still dreading any future math classes though for my BA to be honest, but at least I got the first one done.
>
> **Gabriella:** We're teaching kids to count bears and I'm in a class where it's math, I'm never going to use at Head Start. But I had one great teacher. And on our last final, she let us bring in one index card with some notes and I wrote as tiny as possible and filled everything. And I think if we hadn't had that, I wouldn't have passed me with that note card.
>
> **Juanita:** For me, it was a different experience because just when I . . . college is a different experience that I have. My country, the best school is totally different. It's like day and night is the difference that I tell you. When I was participating in those classes, for me at that first it was so difficult for all that challenge that I

have. But in reality, the school wasn't hard at all. I think it's easy. It was easy for me because I was able to complete all the task that I was required. A difference in my country it was just to think in this or I need to pass some rules . . . but here the questions was so easy for me sometimes. I don't know why.

Focus Group Two had this conversation about math:

Sabrina: I remember taking this math. I hate math. I can do it, but I've always had issues with math. So I remember taking this math class and I remember just bawling my eyes out, like I can't do this! And I was talking to a co-worker and my husband and I just felt like it was the end of the world. And I ended up getting an A out of the class. So, but I just, I just have all this baggage from elementary school from, does that make sense?

Kim: I had tons of support, of course, from the [specific Head Start program], letting me go to school. But when it came time for math . . . sometimes we would have classes here at the [specific Head Start program] we could take. And so I took writing here and I took math here and it happened to be that this wonderful man [faculty member], and his wife actually, I think works for [community college], but he was teaching the math classes I think. So, I took both of them with him and he would tutor me. And then one of my co-worker's friends that worked here at the [specific Head Start program] would tutor me. And I remember [faculty member] being like, “Oh my gosh, I think she's going to ace this test.” What? . . . “Okay, I'm ready.” And I came down, and I took it real quick. Got the test done. But yeah, lots of support from people . . . that helped to get me to pass the math.

Sabrina: . . . one of the things that I did to help me get through, because I have total test anxiety. I don't know what it is when somebody's sitting next to me or whatever, if they've finished before me, I think that I'm dumb or whatever, and I'm not fast enough or whatever. So I asked the teacher, if I could go to the study lab to take tests and stuff like that, and that is what helps me get through it because then there wasn't anybody for me to worry about being there.

R: Do you know how you knew about that?

Sabrina: I think I was just talking to the teacher and I just knew that that was a barrier for me. And I get just, I have ADD, so I get distracted very, very easily, too…And, I take longer than most people because I get so distracted so easily. So, but I think it was just knowing myself and then talking, asking the teacher, just going up to her, asking her, “This is my problem. And can you help me with this?”

Beneita had a different feeling about math than most of the participants, although it echoed to some extent what Juanita, who also speaks Spanish as a primary language, had said in Focus Group One about some of the questions being easy.

> **Beneita:** For me, math, I love math and was easy classes because lesson was the same in Spanish and in English…The math classes was the easy for me because of, I don't need to do learn words or something like that. It was easy, because the numbers, I know how the numbers works and so was easy for me yeah.

Barriers to Success. I asked the participants about what might have been, or felt like, barriers for them. On the college side issues such as when classes were scheduled, time and availability to meet with faculty, and the overall time to get a degree were discussed. Participants also restated or expanded on some of the things they faced as individuals, such as transportation, travel time, and work and home responsibilities.

> **Megan:** I had to do 16 to 36 hours within 12 weeks in the [lab school]. So, I had a very tight schedule of waking up, going to the lab school every morning for two hours, and then going to work for six hours, and then coming home and doing homework until 11:00 at night . . . I was now working 40 hours as a teacher for Head Start and then going into class in the evening twice a week, and then I really only had energy for homework on the weekends.
>
> So, I think the challenge for me was just time, because doing online, I was able to at least have my weekends free, but then doing it in person plus working, I only had . . . I didn't have any time anymore. So, time was the thing for me. Everything else, I was able to do it. I have a type A personality, so I make lists. I make sure I get them done. I try to stay on top of things. But the biggest challenge was time really.
>
> **Juanita:** For me, the most was the language. They say the most barrier because now I feel more comfortable, but at the beginning I don't feel very comfortable to talk. Even I understand the most, I feel this barrier that I myself, I say I need to take off this barrier because even the teacher told me, "You can do it. When you talk, I can understand you." I take a lot of time to take off this barrier.
>
> Sometimes at this time when I'm going with my children because they are bigger, all the time I just, "Ask something," "Mom, you can do it." It's something that ourselves put this barrier, the language. This is the most big barrier and economic.

I'm looking for one way to another way, all the time I find something to continue. This is the more barriers that I found during my school years.

Kim: . . . not having a printer. There was no printer at home, so you'd have to save . . . If you did do something at home, you had to try to save it and hope you . . . I wasn't super good on the computer, so it was like, "Oh my gosh. I don't know what a pdf is. I don't know what this is." I had to learn all this stuff as I'm going. So, I think getting back and printing, then have it be lost, or it wasn't there when I thought it was there. Where did it go when you sent it to a printer?

Sabrina: I wanted to do it faster. It took me probably about four years I think, to complete it. A two-year degree, it took me four years because I was only taking like six credits at a time. So for me that was a barrier. I wanted to finish it faster, and that thing was a barrier for me because I've always been terrified of that, and that's probably what's holding me back from getting my Bachelor's degree as well.

Beneita: . . . I dropped my classes sometime because when I take one or two classes, I said, "This is so difficult" . . . And when I started on my thinking to drop some classes, I say, "Oh, no, I go over there. Like I just say, "I can do nothing in the class because I don't understand because I really want to be, I don't understand something." Maybe I go over there and stay all the classes over there good attendance. Maybe give me a C in something like that. I was thinking when the class was difficult to say, oh, and I just say maybe I go to attend every day they give me a C. But I never took a C.

Cathy: I guess for me, the childcare and the classes, the times that they were being held and during work time, that was a barrier because I had to get prior approval . . . That was a big barrier and trusting people because I'm so protective. I think that was the biggest barriers and transportation because I ended up living in [city] and driving [to the college] and, or I work in [city] and I'd come [to the college] and I worked in [city] and came [to the college] and so that was hard. But I made it work because I was working and because I had lived on welfare for many years and you live off the income they give you, but when you start work it's like, "Oh, okay. It wasn't much, but yeah." So I was able to do it. I don't know how. Gas and transportation, childcare.

Kim: I think now that kids have to meet with an advisor after they take their placement test, and they meet every time I think with . . . That makes it so much easier than what we did. We just did it all over the place, and then it was so much more confusing. If it would have been like, I don't know, you do your pre-reqs, and then you do, okay, one, but I was . . . There was things that were so messed up on there. But everybody worked together to help me still be able to get it.

Gabriella faced the challenge of taking classes at the times she needed, especially after the program in which she was enrolled experienced budget cuts.

> **Gabriella:** I wanted to graduate a lot sooner than I did obviously, but there was times where one class is only offered one semester and it wasn't on for the next semester. And [faculty member], she's the head of the program, she was only working about half time and it was so hard sometimes to get appointments with her. I used to joke and say she was like Sasquatch because she was so elusive
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> . . . I don't like to drive so it was a little harder taking night classes. The teachers were all great . . . I mean, I had a computer, so that wasn't an obstacle. I think the only obstacle would be that I worked until about 4:00 or 5:00 every day and sometimes classes were during the day so that would be the hardest part.
>
> It was interesting. I think it was while I was there, or the year before that [community college] had budget cuts to that program. So a lot of the classes were taken away or limited and it was a little bit of a difficult . . . But it was difficult for everybody involved because like I said, I had classes during my class time and it was hard to get there late at night.

The participants expanded on the barriers they faced during the focus groups. One of those barriers that also came up in the individual interviews was not being able to take the courses they needed when they needed them, including the challenge of getting the advising they needed and how their experiences compared.

> **Gabriella:** One of the bigger challenges that I had was talking with a guidance counselor because it was just such a confusing process . . . they were like, "Well, do you want this AA, this AA or this AA?" And I was like, "What is the difference?" And they're like, "Well . . ." And they didn't even seem a 100% sure. Not that they weren't helpful, but just the whole guidance counselor, they left it really open. I'm like, "Just tell me what to do. I don't know what to do," but that was definitely a challenging part, definitely.
>
> **Megan:** It was the advising center. I went through two advisors. They were like, "Oh, I'm not sure what to do," because there's a whole thing with me transferring my credits in and kind of figuring out what department I needed to go to. And so a woman, she tried her best to help and then she was like, "I'm going to send you to this person." I don't remember their names. I met them both one time. And then once I got sent to that guy, he sat down, he looked at it. He's like, "Oh, yeah, you need to go to this department." And then, he sent me where I needed to be.

Gabriella: They used a different system. They were totally different, not that faculty wasn't helpful, but the co-guidance counselor experience was interesting because you couldn't make appointments. It was all drop in and it was really weird times. And you never knew if the person in front of you was going to be talking for 2 hours or 15 minutes. And it was just a really . . . I'm just so glad it's over.

Kim: . . . So I was just all out of whack and constantly the lady that worked in our office that was our education coordinator she'd be like, well, let's see where you are . . . She'd make this little list of what classes to take next. But when I watched my daughter go to college for a specific program, as this was a specific program, I didn't do it like that. I was skipping all over. I was doing infant toddler development after I already done middle childhood. [It did not] flow how it was supposed to . . . The wonderful thing about the [community college] ladies was at the end, sitting with them and going, okay, let's look and see what we need to do to get this, where we need to go to get this right. So that was like a system sort of problem, I suppose.

Sabrina: . . . sometimes they won't let you take it if you don't have that class, the previous class done. So that can be a challenge if you're doing it out of order . . .

Beneita: For me it was the classes that was some in different, the schedule, my job was the challenge to found the classes that I need at the different time. Sometime they offer in the morning, but I was working, I can't take, so I need to take like, the teacher say take one over here, one over there, different classes, but by teacher and [community college] was so flexible. And they be flexible to take different classes of how I can put it in order.

Finding out that she would be able to get college credit for her CDA made a big difference to Juanita.

Juanita: I was thinking, "Oh my God, this is the second year." It was my second. Supposed to be, to get the AA is 2 years doing the full-time student, but I was a part-time student. I would say, "AA was 4 years," I was thinking. One day, my sister was in college asking something. She called me, "Sister, something that I found that you don't know was that they get your CDA. They give you credits for your CDA. Go ask." "Oh, yeah? Really?" "Yes, go ask." I went to ask and they get my preschool CDA, and they gave me 11 credits.

This reduced the time to finish. I passed this information to them, other partner that I have, the co-worker that was with me at the same. I told her, "Do you know what I did? My sister found that we can bring your CDA, preschool CDA and they gave me 11 credits." "Really?" "Yes." She went to the next day. Yeah, we did. Supposed to be, we are four years for finish, and we did this in three years.

The credits earned from the CDA and previous college credit also came up in the conversation in Focus Group Two.

> **Beneita:** . . . But the good thing is that before I went to the college, I was taking my CDA and my job. I know you have some credits from my associate and this helped me a lot because I have some observation [course] and something like that. And that this helped a lot.
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> **R:** Did anybody else get CDA credits?
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> **Sabrina:** . . . I went to college and I almost had an associate degree. I did it in office administration, but I waited like 10 years before I went back. I stopped doing it because my son was having mental health issues and I had to be at home with him. So then I think I had 80 credit hours and I needed 92 to graduate or something like that. So I was really, really close to graduating. And so then 10 years later I go back and they only take, they would only take like 21 credits of my 80 credits. So I basically had to start all over again.
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> **R:** Cathy, were you nodding that you got CDA credits?
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> **Cathy:** I did. I did. Years ago. Yes . . . I didn't quite know what I was doing, but my work, we had a great person advisor that helped us get through all what we're needing to do. So yeah. I was able to use all my different credits for different things. I don't know how but they worked it out for me.

Another topic revisited when discussing barriers in the focus groups was the financial challenge. Although most participants had their tuition paid by Head Start, purchasing textbooks and transportation costs could still be a barrier.

> **Gabriella:** I got compensated a lot from our training committee. There were still times where there were mix-ups and I either had to buy something on my own and it was just, the price of books, I just, I can't believe how expensive they are . . . I would say [the most expensive was] about $160 . . . It was math or it was computer and it came with three books and they were sealed together and you had to get one book 'cause there was a certain code to get you into a certain program and it was just unbelievably expensive, just between tuition and that, I don't know how people go to school. If I hadn't had help, I wouldn't have been able to do it.

Beneita and Sabrina remembered receiving financial incentives beyond tuition from their Head Start employers when they completed courses.

> **Beneita:** Head Start support me a lot economical, because I buy only some books, but they support me with also the first classes I take. I passed the class, they give me a check. That was so helpful for me.
>
> **Sabrina:** Yeah. I think it was the same, Head Start, you had to get a C or better grade and then they would, I can't remember how much it was now. I don't know if it was the full cost of the class or just partial. I can't remember now. Maybe it was a 100 dollars per credit. I'm not sure . . .
>
> **Sabrina:** It's interesting, but that is the only thing that they did besides, I did get to do my practicums in the opposing class. There's a AM and PM and I was able, so that made it pretty convenient for me to do my practicum in the opposing class. But, and then just family, like my husband, I already mentioned, and then money-wise, my grandmother helped out. There wasn't a lot for her to pay, but she did help with books and things like that.
>
> **Beneita:** My husband gave me a lot. Everything he could give me. He said, "You can do that, you can do that to. Go, go, I am here to support you and don't worry . . . We will see how we do some on to the money, but you go to where you go."

Cluster #4: Working for Head Start

I asked how the participants felt being a Head Start employee supported or created obstacles to them earning their degrees.The demands of work on their time came up, but also how it felt to leave the children, families and coworkers in their programs to go to class or practicum. Participants talked again about the support from people with whom they worked and the importance of the financial support they received from Head Start. They also shared how they connected their coursework to their work at Head Start, implementing techniques from their classes or practicum sites and finding that they were successful. While the participants reported a sense of satisfaction in being able to apply what they were learning with children and families, they sometimes ran into resistance when they brought these new ideas back to their programs.

> **Beneita:** Especially when the teacher gave us ideas or something like that. And then we come and almost the same day we come in over here and we practice they give us give more like a feeling to work to help the children better.

I think I do more . . . I don't know the word in English is somewhat, *seguria misma*. I'm more comfortable to do that thing that I want to do when I take classes I say "Yeah, I learned," because I have like big deal over here. So I know how I know how I have security in myself.

Gabriella: I just think it was very beneficial to be a student and be a Head Start teacher at the same time. Though, I also kind of wish that I would have went the opposite way and been a student first and then came in here ready to share what I learned. But it was a very unique experience. I'm glad that I got to pioneer that.

They were so supportive. My teaching teacher, I know sometimes it was difficult for her, especially when I had to miss that first hour of class, but we made it work and everybody just went out of their way. I didn't start driving until June because I grew up in a big city, so there's a lot of bus taking and on those days when I had to go to [community college] and then come back, our regional assistant at the time would drop me off and pick me.

Sabrina: I think we work much harder than teachers in the elementary schools because my title is Teacher Advocate, so I have not only a preschool teacher who does all the lesson planning, documentation for development and all of that. We'll do home visiting and I'm a social worker as well. How many [K-12] teachers do that?

Julie: Just the long hours of trying to work full-time and do a good job at your work, and then going home and studying, or getting up extra early trying to have that time to do your studying. It was hard, but I just think that at Head Start in general, it's a tough life. I've lived at Head Start for years now. Oh, no. What year did I graduate? I don't know, it's been a few years, but it doesn't get any easier. Head Start is just demanding. It takes a lot out of a person. Your work is never done.

Kim: . . . I mean, I used to never speak up at staff meetings. Sometimes I'm the only one speaking up at staff meetings now, because I'm just like, "What's the worst that could happen? Really? I don't think it could be that bad. You know what you're doing." I always tell myself "You know what you're doing." You don't know everything, and I'm not going to . . . I'm not trying to say that I know everything. I'm just trying to add something to the conversation.

. . . I don't think I would have done that before that. I think all of this along the way has contributed to being able to feel better. I think it's good. I think it's been really good for me. I mean, I haven't ever really thought about all this like this, but, yeah.

I mean, I was able to use the stuff I learned at home. I was able to teach it then at my job. I was able to come back and hopefully turn in a paper that seemed like I

> kind of knew what I was doing. At least, I wanted to . . . in high school I was a D/C student, and in college I wanted to be an A or B. And I want to be an A or B employee. And not really B. I really want to be an A employee . . . I told my kids that. Don't ever just settle for being a C or D or whatever student. Strive to do better. Want to be better. So, I think that's what I felt like.
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> **Megan:** It's not just, oh, you're in the classroom with the kids and you're being their teacher. It's you're a family advocate. You are a part of a community. You are also helping children, but you're not just helping and teaching children and getting them ready for kindergarten. You're also helping children who have been through trauma, who have less privileges than other people may have, and a million other things. I mean, I could sit here and make a list. And Head Start really zones into the needs of the kids and their families and not just in the classroom. They really zone in. You're not just a teacher. You're a family advocate, and you have to involve your families…You have to be passionate about that.
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> So, at the beginning it was I need a career being a preschool teacher, and now it's I need a career somewhere where I can meet the needs of these kids and the whole child, not just in the classroom.
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> . . . That was when I was first discovering Trauma Smart and started studying it and researching it. It was funny, because it happened to be when Head Start first started giving us trainings in Trauma Smart, and then I took that class, and I was like, "Okay. I'm going to go ahead and do research on this." Then I was also taking a [college class] . . . and we were reading [a] book that I'm still obsessed with to this day. And it all was happening at once, and I was like . . . This is my new passion is helping families and children who have gone through trauma.

Juanita was not able to move up in her Head Start organization without completing her degree. She described her frustration and disappointment as she watched people around her receive promotions, but also that she kept her resolve to focus on her own learning.

> **Juanita:** All the time they put me this barrier that I need to finish my college to get this position. I see other people that they only have the CDA, and they have the position. This is something that I feel that they don't support me at this time, and also because if I get these positions, even with the teacher assistant, preschool teacher assistant, or infants and toddler teacher, I can get the benefit that they have for the scholarship that they have, but I need to do teacher assistant or infants and toddler teacher, and they paid you for the credits.

> I learned this . . . I say, "Teacher, if you need something, ask for help. I'm here to help you." "Oh, it's true. Okay." I help the teacher. I observe how she taught something. If it don't work, I use my extra patience that I was learning in school. Sometimes, I asked them, the teacher, "Teacher, when I'm doing something with a child, can you observe me and tell me if I'm doing something wrong? You have experience, and I'm learning here." . . . "I'm learning observing you, but also I will like that you observe how I was working with the children. My voice that I was using with the children, the words that I was using with the children, all right? I'm making mistake, I will like that you tell me?"

Sabrina also wanted to move up in the Head Start program in which she worked, in part because of the pay raise that she would receive.

> **Sabrina:** I think I just wanted to progress and I really liked being in the early childhood and I didn't want to stay an assistant forever. The money had something to do with it, [it is] quite a bit of bump to go from an assistant teacher to a teacher advocate. So that was a big incentive.

Kim shared the reaction she encountered when bringing back the information she was learning to the Head Start classroom in which she was the assistant teacher. She found the new information was not always welcomed by her Head Start co-workers. At the same time, she was also experiencing not always fitting in at the community college.

> **Kim:** It made sense to me . . . And then it was kind of funny, because, once you leave [practicum], then you go back and share your information there. They're like, "No." Some of them don't want to hear it. They have their way, we have our way, I'm just like, "But their way makes sense. Why don't we store it in buckets or have this so we can see it all, or why don't we . . ." This should be a shared effort that we're all cleaning. It shouldn't be just one person. Or, I shouldn't feel less than because I'm your assistant. I think we should all clean together. There was just different things you kind of learned of how you kind of worked together.
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> I remember spraying down the tables, and somebody . . . at our school, I think at times they'd be like, "Oh, gosh. You can't give them all spray bottles." I'm like, "Yes you can. We did it at [the practicum site]. We all gave them spray bottles. They'll be okay. It's just water. Things will happen. They get their own little rag." "Oh, no. No. Only one spray bottle.
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> **Kim:** I loved it. I thought it was great. I mean, I loved the [faculty] I mean, sometimes I felt like I don't know any of these people, because I think people that are more on campus, all the time, everybody kind of knew each other. So, I sort of

> felt like an outsider at times, like, "Oh, there's just these [Head Start] girls coming in here and . . ." We're not part of the rest of these people . . .

In the focus groups, participants shared stories with each other about working at Head Start and going to community college and how much work this truly was.

> **Juanita:** I need to complete paperwork, home visit before class or after class. And it was a lot of work because the person supposed to substitute those day, don't do those kind of work and I need to work extra or do completely a lesson plan and leave ready for that person to cover for those day. It was really, really challenge because sometimes, the class do those kind of work before . . . sometimes, I don't put that really 100% attention in my class just because I need to complete the other work just because I received pay for that.
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> **Megan:** Yeah. I worked in [city] and then, had to drive to [city] for class and so, that was a whole process. And I mentioned that I prefer online classes specifically for that reason because I don't have to worry about having to rush out the door for anything. So yeah, when I work on my BA, I'll be looking for online classes. I've learned that.

Participants felt the pull of many demands on their time. In Focus Group One, Juanita, Gabriella, and Megan talked about using their lunch break to do homework or catch up on the paperwork their jobs required.

> **Megan:** I think flexibility is really important with the college programs as well as the Head Start [because]I feel like we kind of get, as students who are working and wearing all of these different roles in our lives and being shown trying to get this done, back and forth, back and forth. And so, it is frustrating when you have to leave your job to go to a class or if you have to take practicums or student teachings, and there's only one program you can use for that. And it's like, "Well, that makes it really hard."
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> And considering these colleges are supposed to be serving working students, it's very, very important they take that into consideration. I feel like I was really lucky because [community college] offered a lot of evening classes. I was very lucky in that regard because I didn't have to worry too much, but the practicums and student teachings, that was a whole other ball game for me.
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> **Juanita:** Yeah. I hear the experience of that other person. And something that I just remember and coming on my mind is any time that I have time in my break and my lunch, I mix activities. I make my homework or try to finalize because, again, I have a lot thing to do at home. My baby sometimes don't let me do a lot

things and every time like break or lunch, I have it is when I try to complete my homework for next class.

Sometimes when I go home, I don't have enough time because I do food or cleaning or stuff that I need to complete except homework. And I prefer to focus and try to do my things in my free time. And sometimes my coworker support also when she say, "Oh, this is okay. I can do this. Continue or finish your homework." And she was so helpful in that time.

Gabriella: We were part-day. So, in the morning I was supposed to be doing office work, but sometimes I would do homework. And then we were closed on Fridays, but we still had to be there to clean and do whatnot and I would sometimes do some homework.

Megan: I'm part-day, part-year, but there's just so much to do with Head Start, that I did not have time to do my homework. I would work through my lunch but not on schoolwork. So, I got a calendar and I just went home and did homework and then did homework on the weekends.

These excerpts are from a conversation that took place in Focus Group Two about how well participants wanted to do in their different roles. The support among the participants for one another emerged easily based on their shared experiences, even in this short meeting.

Kim: It was all hard.

Sabrina: I feel like the challenge was just having, not being too tired, like after working and then getting everything in on time. And I felt like my husband, I left a lot, some of you were single, but my husband did a lot of the things that I should have been doing. And so anyway, a lot of guilt, I guess.

Cathy: Tt was challenging because you had to do your homework, but Head Start at the time gave us four hours a week to be able to go to class. And they paid for it. And it was on work time. [Then] you had to do it on your own time after you were done with class, after you were done with your home visits, you could go and take a class that you're required to take. And towards the end, it was either you get your degree or you're going to be an assistant. And so, I got my degree within a year. I only had a few classes, but yeah, the challenge really was trying to do everything and plus raise my boys. So I did it, I looked back and I don't know how I did it. I'm just going to be honest. I don't know how I did it.

Kim: You did it though.

Sabrina: That's good.

Beneita: I am agreed to that you say, because I have a challenge too it was so hard, especially because English was my second language. This was very hard for me to try to understand everything, communicate . . . it was very hard for me.

Kim: . . . I wanted to do a really, really good job at work. And I wanted to really do a really, really good job at school…I wanted to be an A employee and an A student. And so juggling that with my kids and my family and work was hard, but I do appreciate Head Start so much for everything. I didn't pay a penny for my education and that is not what I see all these new young girls that are coming to work that have a higher degree than me, that didn't work all the way through from Head Start like I did. They're drowning in school debt and we're doing the same job.

Cathy: And that's where I was too because I'm a perfectionist and I still am to this day. I have to do everything way up here . . .

In Focus Group One, Gabriella and Megan remembered, as participants had in the interviews, that their new learning was not always easy to bring back to their more experienced co-workers at Head Start. While there were differences among the sites at which they worked, commonalities did emerge.

Gabriella: . . . I learned a lot of new things. Not that Head Start isn't great with the trainings and keeping up with what's going on in the world of early childhood education, but I was learning about emergent curriculum and all these great things at [community college]. And then I would go to Head Start where some of the teachers were still going, Hey, this is March. We're going to learn about dinosaurs. But I would just stop if, if I had the opportunity to present, [I could] speak to the Head Start staff as a new student and what I was doing and just explained, you know, why these new things were happening and you know, why they should change their ways and their thinking and how effective it could be also, I think that would really would have helped because I was going to school.

Megan: I was learning the newest things and then coming to Head Start and I really had no one to share it with. So [if supervisors] had given us an opportunity to share what we were learning with everyone else that would have been implementing it, but just having the opportunity to go, Hey, there's so much more out there than themes and . . .

During Focus Group Two, the many responsibilities a Head Start classroom assistant or teacher might have were discussed by the participants.

> **Sabrina:** If you've ever worked for Head Start, you probably wore every hat that you could've worn. You ride the bus . . .
>
> **Cathy:** I was a bus driver. We as assistant teachers, I was an assistant teacher, that's what I was originally hired as. But as an assistant teacher, you had to drive the bus once a month. And so you had to get your, they don't do that anymore, but you had to have your CDL (Commercial Driver's License. And then I ended up driving the bus because they couldn't fill the bus driver position. So I ended up driving the pick-up route every day for the entire year [before] I'm going to teach my class.
>
> **R:** I'm guessing everybody's . . . done their fair share of riding the bus, even if you haven't driven it. Is that true?
>
> **Kim:** I was always was told, "Don't do it, Kim. Don't do it. Don't get your CDL because if you do it, you're going to get stuck on that bus and you're never going to get off." So I was like, "Oh no, I'm a terrible driver . . . you don't want me to drive children away. You don't want their lives in my hands, it would be horrible." When really, I probably don't even have any tickets. Maybe one. I'm not a bad driver, but I was not getting stuck on that dang bus.
>
> **Sabrina:** Now I was a bus monitor for a year and did that every day, and it was crazy. And I have so much respect for the bus drivers and the bus monitors. I helped in the kitchen a lot for a lot of years and I have a love-hate relationship with the kitchen. And then an assistant. And then every time I had a teacher that was out ill a lot, and so I was a head teacher, but I got paid piddly to be this as an assistant.
>
> **Kim:** I know. Doesn't that irritate you? That so irritates me.
>
> **Sabrina:** Yeah. I've got called out for head checks when I wasn't . . . Teachers have to do head checks, but you also had to do office duties when all the office staff are out. So that's a little unique, I don't think sometimes . . . An elementary school teacher is not riding the bus usually.
>
> **Cathy:** Or cleaning. We have to do all the cleaning.
>
> **Kim:** One time, we had a full-time teacher that came to Head Start that was . . . I don't know if he had his teaching degree. He had some kind of degree. So the [specific Head Start program] hired him, but he looked around at the end of the day and he said, "You want me to clean?" And he said, "That's beneath me. I'm not doing that." And I was like, "Oh boy, you'd probably better go."

Sabrina: Not just cleaning, mopping, doing all that. So our program has a center aide, and she comes in, she does all the food prep and everything that comes from a kitchen . . . and she does all the prep for both classes because there's an AM and a PM. And then if she's not there, it falls on everybody else to get everything done because they really don't have subs. We were having a really hard time getting subs and there's a lot that is expected. And, finally, this year we all got a $6 to $7 raise, depending on whether you had an [associate degree] or a bachelor's, but I got a $6 raise.

Sabrina: So we're finally getting paid what we're worth.

After a bit more conversation, Cathy added,

Cathy: That's not even doing . . . If your teacher calls in sick in my program, then you have to do a back-to-back [morning and afternoon class].

Commitment to Head Start. Each participant talked at some point about their commitment to Head Start. Some participants started with Head Start after their children were enrolled in the program, while others found it as a second career path. No matter how they started with the program, each participant indicated what working at Head Start means to them and generally expressed an intention to spend their career with Head Start.

Gabriella: I was working at the mall in [city] and I saw that they needed subs and I do have some [experience as a] pediatric dental assistant, we had to take some early childhood education classes. And they said, "Hey, any experience with children is great." And I emailed them and they said, "Yeah, sure. You can come be a sub." And I just fell in love with it right away, the first moment. And actually, [Head Start site] was the first building that I came into. I said, this is where I want to be.

Julie: So I went to the [migrant Head Start program], and I did my practicum there. And then they wanted to hire me like the next week, so I ended up going to work there. And that . . . shoot, I stayed there probably 17 years working for them and started pursuing my degree through [community college].

R: So you and Head Start have a history, for sure.

Julie: I am a lifer. Yep, my heart is there . . .

I asked Megan if she had to commit to working for [Head Start] for any period of time since they were paying for her to attend college.

> **Megan:** I don't know, because . . . So, Head Start, there's a specific position a person who handled all of this, and I just don't remember talking about it or signing anything. So, I don't know. I've been told by other people that "Oh yeah, you've got to work for them for a couple of years," but that's not my experience. I'll have to look into it. I guess I don't care, because I plan on retiring with them.
>
> **Sabrina:** I always loved kids and I just happened to fall into it actually. I was looking for a job and I actually ended up getting hired and I knew nothing about child development when I went in there. I mean I have my own son but I knew nothing really. I've been now looking back and so I just fell in love with it, and then my son was also a high needs child . . . And so I just have extra patience I think because of him. And so if I can make it through him, I can make it through any kid, just that experience with him . . . so I just kind of fell into it really . . . And, I just fell in love with it because I was in [a business career] before.
>
> **Juanita:** In 1997, I start working in the kitchen. I was a cook. All the time, I was thinking, "Oh, I would like to work in the classroom," because I saw the teachers when they were working with the young children, especially with babies. I was thinking, "Oh, I would like to work in this area, but I need to think about it what I need to do first."
>
> The moment when I was working in the Head Start, there's a program that speaks Spanish. It's my language and I feel comfortable. When I asked how I can do to be a teacher?
>
> . . . I passed I think 1997, '98, '99 and 2000. I start work in classrooms in 2004 because I leave for two years to my country again, and I returned in 2004. I start working again in the same program, but as a center aide. This gave me the opportunity to start working inside the classroom with children. It's when I decide to start in school.

Cathy, Beneita, and Kim all came to work for Head Start after having been enrolled in the program as parents. They described the positive impact Head Start has had on their lives.

> **Cathy:** Well, it was a free pre-school . . . I signed up my youngest son . . . and he got in and then it was intimidating because they were coming to my house and I was very secluded and that was really hard. But . . . they helped me. I mean, they helped me in so many ways. There was drug issues and I mean, there was abuse that happened to my boys and just all this. So I was really . . . I guess, secure, [protective of] me and my family, but as Head Start got to know me, it didn't matter . . . They really encouraged me to apply even though, they knew my past and they knew what happened in my life. They still wanted me to work for them . . . And so that's why I'm doing what I'm doing . . . I'm giving back because Head Start gave so much to me.

. . . We work with 20 families at a time, even if we help one of those families, that family's going to teach another family and it's going to go on, and not to build your expectations of you're going to help all 20 families. But I learned more life experiences than I would have in books. And I'm not being critical or judgmental, but I have some experiences some people never have because of what I went through.

Beneita: I remember, because all my life, I want to learn things. Also, I want to work with children, but I don't have opportunity for my studies childhood. So when my big daughter went to the Head Start, I went over there like a volunteer, but it was terrible because I really want to go over there. And I was working to do childcare at home with some neighborhood, and they paid for me, but I really want to go over there to the Head Start, to learn a little bit more. And I give to my sister-in-law and say, "Can you care this children that I care and I give the money to you and then I go over there for free." And two days a week, I went to my daughter's Head Start. And then at this time [name] my co-student . . . She was like a supervisor assistant or something like that. And then she coming over here, she was so nice person. She coming over there and say, "You know Senora, you want to take classes, you need to work. You apply over here, you can work over here. And then they pay for your classes." And I said, "Oh, no, this is awesome." And then try to apply over there and have don't any experience to work in Head Start, but they gave him the opportunity to be like a floater in the site.

I was so happy for that. This was something very nice for me. And when I tell the teachers, I really want one day you will work like them. And then what surprise for me, because when the migrant program finishes, they laid off almost everybody, but don't lay off me. The supervisors say, "Can you stay over [the] break for the other program that coming over?" Then said, "Yeah." "Can you stay like called assistant or something like that?" and said, "Yeah," everything that they said, I said, "Yeah." And they come in and the next year, when the program start, they upgraded me to work like a teacher. You know how many they pay for me? Eight dollars but I don't ask them for the pay. I don't want them for nothing. I really want to be a teacher because I be a teacher, they paid for me. They pay for my classes.

Kim: Head Start really . . . I'm like, "You want me to go to Washington, DC? You want me to go there [as a parent]?" They're like, "You can go." I'm like, "No. I'm not going. I'm not getting on a plane. I'm not going there. That would be so weird." Then I went home, and my husband . . . he said, "When are you ever going to go there?" I was like, "True." I'm like, "You think I can take my best friend with me?" He's like, "Yeah, call her up and ask her, because I can't leave the kids. One of us has to stay back here." I was like, "Okay."

So, then I went, and I think right then I thought, "I did this." We figured out a way all around this gigantic city. I'd never been out of this little town hardly. I mean,

> when I got married, we moved to [a large city] for a little while, but I kind of stayed in my area. Yeah. I think they gave me a chance to go. Even though that director of that program that . . . if I saw her anywhere, I would still thank her for ever giving me the chance . . . [that] she believed in me at all. Maybe she just needed two more hands and legs around the classroom. I don't even know. But the fact that she let me come on, and that she didn't say, "Why are you always here?" I don't remember doing a background check, but maybe they did when I was volunteering . . . But they all just kind of included me and helped me along the way and let me go to school. They never ever said no to a class. It was good. I've had a pretty good life.

Cluster #5: Enjoyment, Growing Confidence, and Sustaining Momentum

I asked the participants what they enjoyed about their experience in community college early childhood education programs and more about how they were able to complete their degrees. Despite different experiences with readiness, there were comments about a sense of empowerment in going to school and being in college as they progressed through their programs. Participants again had examples of learning new curriculum and strategies and enjoying integrating the information from their college courses in their work at Head Start with children and families.

> **Gabriella:** It was funny. When I graduated, I had a little certificate that said I had graduated with…I had greater knowledge in curriculum and I was like, oh, I did not know that. I think I did but it was great because what they teach you at [community college] is so modern and Head Start also gives us a lot of trainings and there was a lot of modern teaching. There are some teachers that have been here for 15, 20 years and they're very set in certain ways, like May is dinosaurs and June's going to be Hawaii. And right now, the focus is really an emergent curriculum, and I think it was great to come in with that new knowledge and say, hey guys . . .
>
> **Kim:** When I very first started taking the classes, it wasn't like I was like, "I'm going to get my ECE degree. That's what I'm going to do." I didn't have that in mind. I took class, class, classes here, classes there.
>
> **Beneita:** For me, everything was exciting because I want to do that but was hard. Sometime I have feeling to say, "No, I don't take more classes," but then like, we are a group and say, "Yeah, we can." Especially [name]. [Name] every time say, "Yeah, teachers, we can." And she had that her son was almost in the high school.

> So she don't have too much problem with that. [Name] and me have children almost the same age. And she's saying, "No, this is so hard," but then that teacher they give too much support.
>
> [Also] I think a lot of support from my teacher. And they say, "What classes do you want to take?" "I don't know, we are planning." And then they advise us and say, "This is the easy one. Maybe you take this, maybe take in this difficult time, when you work full time, maybe you take the easy ones, like one or two credits or three or something like that." And then we say, "Oh, okay." I was excited and say, "Oh, they pushed me, like support me to take classes to continue to my classes." . . . I really like to do the bold things, like make connection. And I think and most of the experiences were so good.
>
> **Cathy:** . . . I didn't know what I was getting myself into, every class. I could read about it and ask people about it and get a book on it, but I wasn't ready for any one of them. And especially the child psychology . . . That because I had never taken a psychology class. They had me go right into that instead of the basic psychology and that intimidated me big time. So I didn't think being ready because I had to take care of my boys. That's the priority. But yet I had to work to take care of them.
>
> . . . The cool thing was at the very end, right before I had to get my degree, I had to take an elective. I'm like, "Okay, I don't know what an elective is." I hear you got to take exercise or something weird. And I'm like, "I don't do that stuff." But I had a mosaic class and I'm like, are you sure? I had to go through a couple of different people here. It's like, "Are you sure I can take this class and it'll count?" And that was just the best thing that ended because now I loved it and it just rounded everything out. It was like, "Wow, I was able to do this after all these years.

Kim described trying to figure out some of the expectations and new language she encountered as a college student, but also noted her own resilience.

> **Kim:** . . . or citing work. I'd be like, "Google, what does it look like to cite?" . . . The writing classes I did was like, "Write a contrast and comparison," and blah, blah, blah. It didn't say cite your work or anything. Or "Write something that you love about fall." I don't know. It was just like I didn't ever cite stuff. So, I was like, "I have no idea how to do this."
>
> . . . Sometimes in class the lingo they would use . . . I remember . . . not knowing what CC [meant] . . . They were like, "Oh, just CC her," and I'm like, "I have no freaking idea what they're talking about." I didn't know it for like two years, and . . . I have no idea what that is.

> **Kim:** Probably if you're a Head Start parent, you're . . . I mean, none of us out there have very much money. So, we probably all maybe have a little bit of resilience and persistence in us somewhere where we're going to make it, or we're not. It's either you're going to be an addiction problem, or you're going to . . . decide what you're going to do.

Kim also reflected on her husband's adjustment to her taking community college classes and graduating with her degree, and how the support of her co-workers sustained her.

> **Kim:** I mean, he came to my graduation.
>
> **R:** Well, there you go.
>
> **Kim:** He came to my graduation. I think he just is a very old school . . . His mom and dad are still married 60 years. His mom worked, but, I mean, she had dinner made . . . She got off at 3:00 from the mill . . . and she just still did everything . . . She didn't stay late. She didn't go to college . . . So, I think he thought that's just what you're supposed to do.
>
> When I wasn't home until like 7:00 or 8:00 because of a class, and I didn't make dinner, he was like, "What's the problem?" But I think he was proud of me . . . He'd never know unless he went to school how much work it is . . . He has a different kind of brain, and he's an artist, and he has a trade . . . So, he never had to go to school to make a decent living . . . That wasn't my path. I had to go to school.
>
> **Kim:** Then my co-workers, just sometimes being in the same class or encouraging each other, "Come on. You can do it." . . . I loved doing the activities . . . that I could then take from the classroom, or from school, and then take it to the classroom. Still, I share those with parents sometimes and show them… I love the practicums too, even though it got me out of my comfort zone. I was like, "I have to do circle, and I . . ." It wasn't in my own little element . . . So, that made me feel like I could do it.
>
> **Gabriella:** I'd been in college before and I've graduated high school and I knew that I'd be able to…And like I said, some of it was repetitive because these are things I'm learning at Head Start and Head Start trainings and I almost felt a little bit cocky in class. I'm like, oh, I already know all about this. I don't have to learn. But I still listened and engaged and attended.

Juanita shared some of the details of her journey in the community college and what kept her moving forward toward her degree.

> **Juanita:** I start with the EC classes. I have scare because there's the language principle. Working with children helped me a lot because was easy to understand the teachers when they started talking about children, how teach children during their art playing. How help the children build their abilities.
>
> I only was a part-time student, and I was working. This take me more time, but this is the only way. This was a little difficult but we can do that. My husband, "You can do it. You can do it." Sometimes I say, "Oh my God, no. I can't. I think I don't." When this happened, I called the lady that was my coach in the [community college], the [specific college access program] program. I say, "Oh my God, I can't continue." "No, no, no, no. You need to continue. Please, you need to continue. You can do it. You can do it."
>
> Also in this program, we write a letter to myself… For this moment when I feel that I can't anymore continue, they send me this letter. I receive the letter, and I start to read the letter . . . and I say, "Okay, I can do it." This helped me a lot. This letter helped me a lot because I feel that I can do that. I can do that.

I asked Julie how she knew she could complete her degree.

> **Julie:** Wow. I guess at first, probably not. The very first classes, no. Boy, thinking back about it now, I don't even know what I was thinking or how I was brave enough to go. I just don't know. I guess as I became successful with them, I guess I felt like I was prepared to go . . . I guess I felt confident enough that I would be okay.

Later in the interview Julie shared how her experience at the community college led her to want more education.

> **Julie:** Oh my gosh. I guess it was just a major self-esteem booster every time I reached a milestone. That was just huge. I didn't think that I would ever, ever be able to get even just the one-year certificate. I thought no way I could do that, taking three credits at a time. I remember talking to my advisor when I was working on that, and I just said, "But this is all I want, I don't want anything else . . . I just want to get this one certificate here. That's all what my goal is." Low and behold, I think I was addicted . . . it was very rewarding to reach those milestones and get that certificate, and be recognized by my family.
>
> **Beneita:** I think when the teachers give me, like sensitive they say, "Oh, how you do that?" This is awesome job or something like that. I was like, "Oh, I look for good way." Something that . . . Also when I saw my final and I saw that when they put A, it's a surprise, but most of my classes, I think I took A plus. I think I have only two Bs, but most is A, A plus, two Bs . . . And I said, "Oh my God, I

> think I did that." And I think they are very sensitive with the students because they know that it's difficult to take the classes.

Beneita also shared this memory from her practicum site.

> **Beneita:** When my son told me to write the book, I was thinking . . . I should remember one teacher in the [community college] that one day when we tried to read the book for the children in English it was so hard. But one day one teacher come in and say, "It's very difficult when we have tried to learn second language let's go to see and in the circle time, you try to read one book in Spanish and the children and you explain to the children. I speak English, but I go to try one in the Spanish and you look how I read a book." And I said, "Oh, she understand me very well." And this is something that mark my life. And I say, "Oh, she knows." . . . when we were [driving] home, the group of us was thinking, "Oh, this teacher is very, very sensitive and she knows. This is so awesome, she tried to read the book in Spanish."
>
> **Megan:** At [community college], I always felt like I belonged. I felt like I had a purpose when I came to [community college], and I was finding the classes and finding my seat. And I was always nervous the first day of class for some reason.
>
> It's like, "You guys are intimidating." But, no, I'd get there and I'd feel like I had a purpose and that I belonged there and that I'm going to benefit from showing up. So, that's the feelings I always get when I go to [community college], even if it's just the bookstore. I still get that same feeling of "Okay. This is where I'm at. This is where I'm . . . Go in as something and come out as something else," and I like that feeling.

Sabrina shared these thoughts as I asked her about how it felt to be in college and how she knew she could do it.

> **Sabrina:** How did I feel? Stressed out. It empowered me, I think, again to feel good about myself when I was getting good grades and made me feel like I was accomplishing goals and so it made me feel good about myself.
>
> How did I know I could do it? For some reason I'm just really good at being a teacher. I know I'm good at being a teacher. My class scores prove it. I get really high class scores. It's just natural for me for some reason. So that's when I knew that's what I wanted to do is because I'm just good at. If that makes sense
>
> Yeah. So, but what did I love? I've always loved the [children] and what else did I love? I loved how then I felt like I was accomplishing goals and it empowered me and made me feel better about myself because education has always been an issue for me.

> **Megan:** I have always been told that I'm a good learner, so that can also be a lot with my upbringing, because my mom always told me that, teachers have always told me that. I didn't finish high school. I had a very traumatic life, and so I escaped as soon as I could. My junior year, I said, "Okay, bye," got my GED, got it very quickly, scored really high, and left. And I was gone for five years with my husband. We both dipped out and did not come back. So, even with me doing that, I still knew that I would be ready for college. Because as soon was I got my GED, I was ready to enroll and go to college.

Later Megan shared about her experience of knowing she could do it and how she connected to the early childhood education content.

> **Megan:** I knew [I could do it] from the beginning, because I wasn't going to stop. That's just my personality and how I was raised. If I want something, you can get it. I guess it's a millennial thing maybe, because we're always told growing up the sky's the limit, you can do it, anything you want . . . Maybe the boundaries and obstacles aren't talked about as much, but growing up you kind of assume that that's going to come with the package . . . And that's how I always did it. I mean, once I got into ECE, I had a lot of opportunity handed to me, and that was my way. Maybe it's God or the universe or whatever telling me like, "Yeah, this is what you're supposed to do. That's why this is so easy for you to get it done."
>
> . . . It was like fireworks for me, because I had always been working with . . . Well, babysitting at 11 years old. I'm the oldest of five children, so I've always babysat, babysat. Then when it was time for me to get a job, I was like, "Well, I'm just going to work with children, because that's what I know," and that's what I did. Then I learned about ECE, and once I learned about ECE and actually started college, it just lit something inside of me like, "Oh my gosh. I've never been passionate about something ever."
>
> I didn't know that painting is that educational. I didn't know that at 18, 16, 14 years old. And then I learned at 20, oh, wow, they learn so much just by painting. They learn so much when I ask them an open-ended question. Oh my gosh. There's so much that they're learning. So, being able to learn all of this new stuff at first in [the program] was mesmerizing. I mean, I think I talked my mom, my sister, everybody's ears off about everything I learned, and they were like, "Okay, Megan."
>
> . . . And I memorized a speech too. I had never memorized a speech before, but I did, and I nailed it. I was very proud of myself . . . It goes back to the learning . . . It's so exciting.
>
> . . . And bringing all of the steps and thinking in my head, "I'm going to try that. I'm going to try that with my group of children. I'm going to see if this works with

> my group, because my group are the complete opposite of this group, but let's go see. Or maybe they're similar, or maybe not, or whatever," and then it works, and me finding a new way to guide and teach and lesson plan.

Cathy recalled her growing confidence when I asked her about being a college student.

> **Cathy:** Pretty important because I didn't think of myself as that kind of person. I mean somebody who has knowledge, somebody who stands firm, somebody who stands strong and can walk and you're confident because they have an education. And I didn't graduate from high school. I did get my GED here and that was intimidating, but I felt really confident in as a person and as the years went on, it really built my confidence in myself.
>
> . . . I could say I'm in college and I enjoyed the people that I met, even though I wasn't real outgoing. I enjoyed some of the classes a lot because I love making stuff and I loved creating things. That was a really fun, the creative activities class, all those, I really liked those literacy. It just built my self-esteem in that I enjoyed that because I didn't have it.
>
> Head Start hired me with no experience. And so I had done daycare and Sunday school and volunteered in the classroom at Head Start, so that was all the education I had. And then I go into college class, which I had never taken before ever. That I didn't know what to expect. And then when I was realizing it, it got scary. But again, I had people that were very helpful and even my work, they were real supportive. It was more the knowledge of it and of especially early childhood, but as the time went on it got better.
>
> **Kim:** Well, I enjoyed it all, I think, except for the math. I really did. I think I started out very, very naïve and very . . . I think I've always never had much self-confidence at all, never felt like I was good at anything ever. So, I feel a little bit better. I mean, I don't feel still 100% better, but I feel I'm getting there. I think college overall helped that a ton, because I had to be brave and go, and I didn't always get to go with a friend, or I didn't always get to go with a coworker. So, there was times I had to really just be open to going and just be like, "I can do this," even though I might be sweating, or I was starving when I get there and I can't think, or I'm tired. But I really did enjoy it.

During the focus groups, I asked participants what advice they would give colleges, faculty, and Head Start programs. The advice they offered the colleges was that they should try to know them and know what they go through as they take classes.

> **Juanita:** The schedule is important because that program has to undertake or adapt for the necessity for the students . . . The person to planning those programs need to be focused in the necessity . . . for each group of person.
>
> **Megan:** We're tired or exhausted…let's not sit down the whole four hours, but also not just the tiredness, but add a trauma informed class . . . and special needs too . . . And that goes with . . . practicums, because [they're showing us one program] but there are so many early childhood programs. There's Montessori schools, schools in a school system, there's Head Starts, there's childcare facilities.
>
> **Juanita:** Well, I don't know, maybe it's a little crazy, but I participate in one program at night after my work. I'm so tired. I don't [go] by my home because there's a long drive to go back in and I prefer [to] go directly to the school. Sometimes I don't have time to eat and I don't have maybe the money. Maybe, yes, but the time, and I don't have enough food. And sometimes my stomach is like very loud, even in the night. And I said, "Oh my gosh" . . . and I prepare myself with, with some snacks. [In one class] everybody was able to bring some food and on break, we share. And it was so, I'm feel happy. And when it, I don't know food is, it's big in that time. I was so focusing for attention with my stomach, for to eat.

The participants in Focus Group Two also talked about colleges knowing them, particularly knowing that they work for Head Start and how this impacts them as students.

> **Cathy:** I think they need to get to know the person. I would be saying people are so different. They come from different backgrounds. If somehow you could get to know a part of that person and who they are, not their direction, not the [theoretical] part, but the personal part, you can get better understanding of how they can be successful in school. That would be hard to do with every student, but if they were going into early childhood education, just getting to know the [person]. I don't know if that makes sense.
>
> **Sabrina:** I think accommodating people and their needs with certain subjects, like I was telling you how math terrifies me. That's one of the things that kept me from going, but if they make accommodations for certain people that might bring more people to want to further their degree.
>
> **Kim:** Or maybe colleges knowing . . . I don't know. Maybe do all colleges know about the program? Do they know a lot about Head Start? Do they know a lot about who their people are that are coming to get these degrees, that already when they come to the college, do they know if they're already working for [Head Start]? . . . Do they know if they're a full-time worker or they're just a student? Do

> they know which organization they're coming from? What limits them with their schedules? I guess, unless a person told an instructor, they wouldn't know what they're going through.
>
> **Beneita:** I think I'm going to tell them . . . "Be sensitive with your students needed."
>
> **Sabrina:** Needs. Students' needs. Yeah.
>
> **Beneita:** Everybody have different needs.
>
> **Sabrina:** Just like with our [Head Start] children, they all have different needs, so do we.
>
> **Beneita:** We need to be sensitive about that . . .
>
> **Sabrina:** Yeah.
>
> **R**: Any advice for early childhood faculty about this experience?
>
> **Sabrina:** The same.
>
> **Cathy:** Maybe at a different level and not superficial, more deeper level. This is why I'm doing what I'm doing. This is my heart. Something like that.

The participants said they would encourage Head Start to support people in completing classes and would tell other Head Start employees that they can earn their degrees. In Focus Group One, I asked about whether Head Start should support existing employees or parents in getting their degrees and the same topic came up spontaneously in Focus Group Two. In both cases, participants expressed the value they placed on experience.

> **Juanita:** In my opinion, I think it's very important the way we hire a teacher with experience. But my experience or serving employees just to start to work. For example, I was part of the interview and the answer that those peoples say it was really, really very important. And I see, Oh, is a good candidate, but when, and actually work then that performer wasn't good enough. And always I say, people learn different way and maybe they'll have the experience and give you the opportunity to learn from all they have experience. But sometimes it's between you want to be here or not.

> . . . And sometimes people, they don't have any degree, love to work with kids. And how to balance those things, sometimes teacher have many years working with kids, but don't have that passion or connect with kids, and sometimes use the, for example, the kitchen lady love, love her use because say, Hi, or hello, have a connection and this is like importance piece for me.

Kim and Sabrina had this exchange about the roles of education and experience.

> **Kim:** I was just telling someone the other day that they were, they were doing like a job description and it was saying that you could have this much college or you could have an equivalent of experience. And I was telling that person, I really think you need both, it ties it all together. Right? So you've already been doing it, you're working, you're living it, you're doing it. But then when you start going to school, you're like, ah, that makes sense why we're doing that. I mean, I think experience is worth a ton. I think just education on its own is not worth the combination.
>
> **Sabrina:** I totally agree with that. Totally agree with it.
>
> **Kim:** I would never, ever just encourage anyone to go to school because I think that school is important, but I think the experience and that together is such a great combination. To have the two and Head Start being like that . . . I mean, I think the performance standards, the professional development that Head Start requires is so important because they value the education. They want you to do it. They know those two things tie together.

In the focus groups, participants shared advice for Head Start and future Head Start employed students pursuing their early childhood education degrees in community colleges.

> **Megan:** Keep paying for it. And I guess the biggest thing for [other Head Start employed students] is stay flexible because you really want yourself to have this education or you're really going to need the time and the financial support.
>
> **Gabriella:** On my program, I felt did wonderful in that. So I just hope the rest of Head Start does as well, because it's really important.
>
> **Megan:** It's not going to be easy, but it's temporary and you can do it, just get on that train and don't get off.
>
> **Megan:** Just that it might not happen as, as fast as you think it is. And that's okay. Because it'll, it'll happen.

Juanita: For me, if I'm that person from another country and also don't speak English as our first language. If I do it, you can do it. This is my advice.

Sabrina: Well, I think for me, when I finally decided to go after my degree, I just told myself I can be in the same spot right now, where I am like two to four years from now, or I can be achieving a goal. I can achieve something. That's what kept me going. It's never too late.

Kim: . . . It's never too late, and it's one foot in front of the other. Just one at a time, just keeping going. If you love children and you want to make a difference in their life, then it's a great job for you. Head Start's a wonderful job. I think we follow families through, many generations of families through, and it's a really wonderful profession. I think it's really a rewarding job.

Cluster #6: Effect on Their Own Children

For the participants who were parenting at the time they went to community college, the impact on their own children came up. Participants talked about their children watching them do homework or going to classes.

Kim: I felt really proud, and everybody kept telling me, "You're going to make your kids so proud. They're going to look up to you. Look what you're showing them." Because a lot of times I wanted to quit and say, "No, I can't do this anymore." They're like, "No, your kids are going to be like, 'Yes, I can do it.'" And I think . . . my youngest one, she is . . . The other kids went to trade schools, and she's going to [community college]. So, I think she saw me . . . Because she was older. They were littler. I think they still think I stayed home. They still think I just don't have anything to do, because they were older when I went to work. They just remember me staying home with them.

Cathy: I only did [Sunday school] a few times and playing with kids and doing activities and reading stories and that's what I did at the Head Start classroom and I helped do some of that. But then going into my upbringing, that it was total negative. But what I learned from Head Start and the classes is I'm not going to talk to my children the way I was talked to. And it worked, encouraging them to talk and use their words and now tell me about that. It made a difference.

Sabrina: I was a mom also and I thought it was good for my son to see me going back to school and caring about college and everything like that. And now he is actually a software engineer and he makes way more than my husband and I combined. I'm pretty proud of that.

> . . . But I think him seeing me work hard and achieve my goals, I think that helped him also, so.
>
> **Juanita:** When my son started going to elementary school, also I need to work with my children. He was behind me, "Mommy, I don't understand this." My husband say, "I try translate for the language," "Okay." I helped him, and I was doing mine. I was working with my son too. It was a beautiful experience doing this.
>
> I enjoy everything because I also was learning. Something that I will like to be this before I have my children because I do a lot of things, beautiful things with my children. When I was schooling, my children now was bigger and say, "Oh my God, I don't did this with my children. I need to do this when my children was younger. I don't help my children with this."
>
> . . . My son for example, I know how that he needs help in this area because I don't have experience. I don't know. I told my son always, ". . . sorry because I don't help you a lot at this age." "No mommy, you don't know." Also, I have even remembers that my children when I start to learn other things. Even they was a little bit bigger, but I know that was good for them.

Juanita continued to share about reading, and we had this exchange about how she has taught her children to love reading, despite no loving it herself.

> **Juanita:** For example, when I was a child, I don't read. My mom, my dad don't read me when I was a child. This is something that I continue working by myself because I don't like to read because I don't have this experience when I was younger. When I say, "No, there's no way it happened with my children." Even I don't like it, I read with my children. My husband, he likes to read, and he helped me a lot to read to my children when they was younger. Now, my daughter, my son, they love read . . . It's something that I feel good because I say no. This something that I pass to when I want to read. I know I read but it's this school and I need it.
>
> **R:** They probably saw you reading for your classes. They probably saw you caring. I mean, they probably thought that you loved reading because you were reading for your homework all the time.
>
> **Juanita:** Yeah, all the time. They both, they love read. My daughter love read. This is something that they never will forget. Also when I saw the children, the young children when I'm working when I read, even I know . . . I read both for them and I make faces and I make something. Then, when I see them and they're laughing or they respond me, this is beautiful.

Later, Juanita and I talked about her taking classes beyond her associate degree and her daughter getting ready to go to college.

> **Juanita:** I take classes the computer too because I was the people that write with a finger. I need to take classes to more faster because I need it. Also, to navigate the computer, to use this, and other. I feel that I can do it, but now I want to support my daughter. Maybe when she's a scholar, and if I see that I can do, maybe I will. Now, I want to start to prepare. When she's incoming, that I say in the way that I say everything is fine. Me, I can do the next step.
>
> **R:** Maybe you will go together.
>
> **Juanita:** Yeah. That is something that my husband told me, "Oh, maybe you both can go to the university."

Although not by design, the participants in Focus Group Two were all parenting during the time they were going to community college. When I asked if they wanted to add to what they said about their family life while they were earning the degree, their conversation turned almost immediately to the positive impact they believe earning a community college degree had on their children almost immediately.

> **Sabrina:** . . . So for me, my son is [in his twenties] now . . . I think it gave him to see me working, at school and working, I think it was very beneficial for him to know that it's important because he went to college and he has a bachelor's degree and he's a computer engineer. And so he makes twice the money I make now and he works for [large company]. So I just think just him seeing me do that was very beneficial for him, even though it was hard for me.
>
> **Beneita:** I remember that I told you the most difficult thing that I have was my little daughter. When I go to the college so they [are at] home with my husband. And I told you that I was thinking at this time I was thinking that maybe when I take my associate, they will be proud of me or something like that. And then in the last year, when they get 16 years old, they make a little party. My daughter and my son and my little daughter give me book. I cry when I take the book. And then the name of the book is *Because I Had a Teacher* (Yamada, 2017). I don't know if you know this book, she [says] “I am like that because I have a teacher.” . . . It's a beautiful book, I cry.
>
> **Kim:** My daughter gave me that book too.

Beneita: Oh yeah?

Kim: Yes, it has a little bear on it, *Because I Am a Teacher*, yes.

Beneita: She gave me this book and so she was engineer, mechanical engineer right now. And she say, because I am mechanical engineer because I have a teacher.

Kim: That's so sweet.

Beneita: Yeah.

R: . . . Did anybody else have that connection between them seeing you go to school and how you think that impacted them either then or later?

Cathy: I think my boys watched me. I raised them by myself and went to school, worked full time, and they saw how hard I put myself towards each thing and especially school. So I get to brag they are in school right now, and they always say it was because of what I did for my life, how I changed it. And I think them seeing me, especially going to school, because that was pretty challenging for me, that they're successful.

Sabrina: . . . It seems like the kids that saw us working hard, going to school and how important it was. They became successful themselves.

Kim: . . . I was thinking, yeah, it was rough. And reading what I wrote about locking myself in my bedroom at night to get some time just to write a paper, or do whatever I needed to do, was rough. And now I see my daughter, my baby, that's just going to be [in her early twenties] soon. She's now in the kitchen [doing homework] like mom . . . in the same kitchen that I was trying to do mine, here as an adult trying to take 10 years to get an associate just because I was trying to work and raise a family.

. . . I feel like it helps you to connect with parents more too, because you've been there where they're at sometimes. So I think it helps connect to push that on them a little bit. I don't know if I'm saying it right, but anyway.

Sabrina: Yeah, you're not telling them to do something that you wouldn't do yourself or that you haven't done. You've been there trying to take a class and juggle and you know.

Kim: My youngest one because mine are [all in their twenties]. So the little one wants to be a dental hygienist. So she's got eight more credits, I think, left to have her associate, and she's just pushing along. And then I think my other daughter who is raising my grandson, she went to beauty school. She loves it. But I think she knows . . . she's like, “Well, you went to school older, I can still go back. I

> don't just have to be a hairdresser. I can do anything I want to do. Maybe I want to be a nurse. Maybe I want to do whatever." And her son is in Head Start, early Head Start home-based program. And so her home visitor, she gets met, they didn't have that program when she was a little girl, but my grandson's in it. And I think her home visitor encourages her that she can do anything. So as a mom, she's on policy council . . . like I was back in those days. So it's great.

Conclusion

The findings from the semi-structured interviews in this phenomenological study illuminate components of the lived experiences of the eight participants. Their thoughtful and candid responses to my questions provide information about the challenges they faced as community college early childhood education students who were also employed by Head Start when they completed their associate degrees. Also revealed in the findings were the factors that contributed to their success. The two focus groups provided an opportunity for the participants to further consider their time as students and interact with one another to bring to light even more about their common experiences. While each person's journey was unique, the responses were organized into related clusters that constitute the study findings. The clusters, as reported in this chapter were Home and Family, Challenges and Support, The College Experience, Enjoyment, Growing Confidence, and Sustaining Momentum, Working for Head Start, and Effect on Their Own Children.

From these clusters, the study themes emerged. Through a process of writing, engaging in a member check via the focus groups, and using a peer debrief, I developed five themes that capture the essences of the participants' lived experiences. In the final chapter of this report, I present and discuss the themes and provide a graphic representation that further synthesizes the findings. I also provide a review of the findings

from a constructivist perspective using the framework of student success, and a discussion of the implications for community colleges, faculty, and Head Start programs. I also address the limitations of the study and recommend possibilities for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This phenomenological study aimed to illuminate a particular lived experience. The purpose of the study was to explore and describe the responses of Head Start teachers to their experiences in community college early childhood education programs from which they graduated, potentially enabling these programs to better meet the needs of this specific subset of students and perhaps even those of the broader community college student population. Further, the study was designed to address the research question: How do individuals who completed their associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs, while employed in Head Start programs, perceive their experience? And, the sub-questions: What challenges or barriers do these individuals report and what factors do these students identify as contributing to their success?

Through in-depth interviews and follow up focus groups, the lived experiences emerged. Analysis of the findings led to five themes that describe the essences of the Head Start employed students' experiences. While the themes of this study are not intended to create generalizable results (Mason 2010; Morgan, 2011), the deep understanding they provide of the experiences allows consideration, or reconsideration, of what the experience may be like for other Head Start employed early childhood education students, other early childhood education students, and community college students in general. As Kincheloe (2008) explained, there is more to most situations than we perceive at first glance.

This chapter includes two interpretations of the findings, first through a presentation and discussion of the themes, then through a graphic representation. This is followed by a discussion of the findings through a constructivist paradigm and using the framework of student success. Implications for community colleges, early childhood education faculty, and Head Start programs are included, as are the limitations of the study. I conclude the report with recommendations for future study.

Interpretation of Findings: The Themes

"Phenomenology is the study of essences, and it holds that all problems amount to defining essences" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. xx). The following section attempts to make evident these essences or themes of the lived experiences of Head Start employed students in community college early childhood education programs in which they earned their associate degrees. The five themes that emerged from the findings are:

- Juggling a complex life: It's a lot.
- Thoughts about time and age are connected to the college experience: This is my time.
- Completing the degree: Support from our whole world.
- A deep commitment to Head Start: I'm a lifer.
- The evolution of self-belief: I can do it, I did it!

The descriptions of the themes include participant comments from the interviews that contribute to the themes. They also include the feedback from the participants to the first iteration of the themes that I shared with them via the focus groups. I have included some additional data from the focus groups in the descriptions of the themes that were not included in Chapter 4, as they provide an additional layer of confirmation of the themes.

Juggling a Complex Life: It's a Lot

The notion *Juggling a complex life: It's a lot* was the theme that emerged the most clearly and concretely in the interviews. Participants' responsibilities at home for children, spouses, and domestic chores weighed on them, which included, at times, the sense of not being there. Additionally, participants had schoolwork, class time, and travel time to and from classes adding to their load. Beyond this, the responsibility of their jobs with Head Start were of great significance for participants. The sense of *it's a lot* was conveyed in words, examples, and stories throughout the interviews, including the use of metaphors such as juggling and wearing many hats. The theme was also displayed as almost a physical weight through participants' deep breaths, raising and lowering of the shoulders, and inflection and tone making it was the most viscerally present theme across the interviews.

In the focus groups, the participants were in strong agreement that the theme reflected their experience and could not be overstated. Juanita explained,

> I think a lot challenges, especial because when I start getting my credits in the college . . . is that I had my daughter, she was little, she was only one year and I was pregnant with my second boy and worked for full time, be a mom and be a student, it was a big challenge because it was so hard to do all those things at the same time.

Beneita had a similar recollection, "Everything is a lot. We need to make that the home, yeah? Like a mom, being short on time, we do everything." After another focus group participant agreed, Beneita went on,

> Also in the school, the homework, and everything from the school. It's a lot, but we need to make very short time. And also in the job, we need to make this faster. Like we need to mop, we need to go faster, we need to do the home visits faster,

> everything faster, because we need to save time to go to the school, to save time to get to home.

The participants described the impact of adding community college coursework to their home and family responsibilities. This included domestic chores for which they felt responsible. As Cathy described, ".Going to school, working, going home, cooking dinner. It was overwhelming." Participants also felt the pull of missing family events or time with children. Juanita's husband took care of their young children. In this case taking them on a walk while she worked on homework, "'Mommy, mommy.' My husband would say, 'Your mommy is busy. Your mommy is making a homework.' 'I want play with mommy, my mommy.'" Kim recalled, "I had a three-year-old and a six-year-old and a 10-year-old and my husband. Yeah. I did . . . . A lot of kids and a husband and a life and a full-time job." Those who did not have children at home commented on their perception that this made completing their degree at least somewhat easier than it was for their counterparts who were parenting at the time. As Megan explained, "I was able to come home and do what I needed to do. I didn't have children to worry about. I made dinner for me and him. If I wanted to not make it, it wasn't a big deal." Much of this data related to this theme is organized into Cluster #1 in the findings, however, it appears across the clusters.

The participants' work at Head Start also continued while they attended college. Sabrina remembered trying to find the energy to accomplish everything, "After working with 20 kids, I mean our classrooms were 20 kids and just finding the energy to go home and do your homework when you're done working." Megan explained the workload this way, "The workload didn't change just because I had school. I still had to get 40 hours of

the work done and go to school." Kim also shared about the workload, bringing up some of the unique features of working in the Head Start program, "It's so much paperwork and so many families that are in high need or crisis." Sabrina talked about the different roles a Head Start teacher plays, "My title is Teacher Advocate, so I am not only a preschool teacher who does all the lesson planning, documentation for development and all of that. We'll do home visiting and I'm a social worker as well."

The participants emphasized that it was not just the work, but wanting to do their jobs well, and not wanting to let their co-workers down. Julie put it this way, "Just the long hours of trying to work full-time and do a good job at your work, and then going home and studying, or getting up extra early trying to have that time to do your studying. It was hard, but I just think that at Head Start in general, it's a tough life." Kim wanted to do well in each of her roles stating, "In college I wanted to be an A or B. And I want to be an A or B employee. And not really B. I really want to be an A employee."

Participants were going back and forth between their work at Head Start and the community college programs, both literally and figuratively. Megan had to drive over 30 minutes from her Head Start site to the community college. Kim talked about leaving in the middle of her workday for classes,

> Sometimes when I got back to work, I had to go right back into more home visits that I prepped before I left, because there was no time to prep when I got back. So, I had to have all my curriculum, all my activities ready, my backpack ready to go when I got back."

The participants also had to navigate integrating their learning into their work. Gabriella explained balancing work and what she was learning in the focus group,

> I was learning about emergent curriculum and all these great things at [community college]. And then I would go to Head Start where some of the

> teachers were still going, ‘Hey, this is March. We're going to learn about dinosaurs.’

Megan agreed, “I was learning the newest things and then coming to Head Start and I really had no one to share it with.” This example illustrates one way in which their responsibilities were evident across clusters. They were not just juggling home and school; they were managing complex relationships and roles, as well.

All that the participants were responsible for was discussed at length in the focus groups. Participants recalled squeezing classes and homework in wherever they could. Gabriella remembered trying to get some of her homework done at work, “So, in the morning I was supposed to be doing office work, but sometimes I would do homework.” In Focus Group Two, Sabrina remembered feeling guilty that she could not do everything,

> I feel like the challenge was just having, not being too tired, like after working and then getting everything in on time. And I felt like my husband, I left a lot, some of you were single, but my husband did a lot of the things that I should have been doing. And so anyway, a lot of guilt, I guess.

The group also had a lengthy conversation about all that Head Start teachers and assistants do, including preparing food, cleaning, and substituting for other staff. Everyone spent time riding the bus, but Cathy even drove it, “And then I ended up driving the bus because they couldn't fill the bus driver position. So I ended up driving the pick-up route every day for the entire year [before] I'm going to teach my class.”

As early childhood education students, participants had homework and learning added to their already full lives. Cathy talked about being a new student,

> It was real tiring being a single mom and going home and I was tired. You had to do all the domestic things and the work. Because I was so new at early childhood

> education, it was all going over my head. I was really struggling because I wasn't quite understanding it.

Kim was balancing life with her children and homework, “There was many nights. Don't come in my room; I'm studying.” She also shared this reflection, on being a new college student,

> I probably don't want to read the book. I want to hang out with my kids. So, sometimes I would be skim reading it before class, like, "How do I get this done?" Yeah. I did not know what to expect. I didn't realize there would be that much.

Gabriella recalled trying to utilize her college’s learning management system, Moodle, “There's just something about it where I think it's way more complicated than it has to be.” Beneita remembered coming home after night classes and hearing these words about how much her daughter missed her, "Where is my mom? When is my mom coming?”

For the participants whose first language is Spanish, completing coursework in English required significantly more time and effort. Beneita shared the process she had to go through to complete her homework assignments,

> I listened and I understand what the teacher says, but I answered the question of everything in Spanish, and then translate in my bad English, and then go to my son. And my son tries to read too, and then go to [community college] . . . The person to help with the homework . . . Tutoring, yeah. I went over there and then when they correct my homework, I give to the teacher.

In Focus Group One, Juanita also described the frustration of understanding the course content, but not being able to express herself,

> And when I was working and got my credits, my language wasn't good at all, nothing, zero, and it was so hard to communicate or understand things. It was awful. It was so hard for me even to do my homework or even to speak with somebody or giving my opinion, it was so hard because I can't choose to communicate with nobody. And I prefer to be silence and quiet and don't got opinion at all even that I have one just because I can't communicate good, well.

There was overlap among the clusters, and even though time contributed to the need for students to juggle their responsibilities, concepts of time also emerged as a separate theme.

Time and Age are Connected to the College Experience: This is My Time

Time emerged as a theme in multiple ways. Participants talked about the *time* it took them to finish their degree, in particular that it was more *time* than two years. Participants reflected on the point in the *time* in their lives that they were completing the degree. This included their age and that they did not complete the degree at a particular *time*, specifically, immediately following high school. As the participants reflected on this theme in the focus groups, they helped uncover the idea that *this was their time*.

One component of time was the time it took to do all the things that were needed to complete the degree. Megan started her degree in an online program and then switched to a primarily face-to-face program,

> I think the challenge for me was just time, was just time, because doing online, I was able to at least have my weekends free, but then doing it in person plus working, I only had . . . I didn't have any time anymore. So, time was the thing for me.

Several participants were commuting long distances, even though they were attending their local community college. Kim recalled arriving on campus only to find her class was cancelled, "Oh, joy. I just drove an hour over here." Participants identified the lack of available classes as slowing them down. Gabriella explained, “It took quite a while because I was working and the classes were during the day and it was so hard. I had to wait a semester to take a class. It got really difficult to consistently finish it.” Beneita also faced this barrier,

> Another difficult thing is to try to find classes at my free time, because I was working at home with my little three and also I take classes. Sometime I really want to take classes, but it was when I was working, or when I have something to do, because I work around 4:00 in the morning and then come in around 1:00 at my home and then make food and clean everything in the home. And then I go to the school. So hard.

Although I did not ask a specific question about age, it came up in every interview. Participants noted their own age and the ages of people in their classes. Juanita remembered her thoughts about the younger students in her classes,

> When I saw this young ladies or boys, 'You have the language. You have everything.' . . . When you at this age, when you are adult and to think that you can lose your time. Then, you need to get the right time to . . . go to school at this time was more even the language was difficult for me and the economic, but the mentality helped a lot because you can lose your time to go school if you don't get the right way.

Age was part of a painful memory about her experience for Beneita, "the younger people . . . sometime they don't want to be in us group because we are old. We don't know nothing about them. Sometime there's something that was sad. Something sometimes hard because they don't know."

Participants shared their comfort, or lack of comfort, with attending college at a point in life that was not what may have been historically considered the traditional time to do so. Gabriella, who was one of the younger study participants, said, "Actually, I wasn't the oldest person there so I didn't feel like I was the grandma trying to be hip in the classroom." Kim compared her community college experience with that of some of her friends who attended the university,

> I never got to experience college like that. Friends I went to high school with went on to [university], and then I was like, "Wow, that's what college is? I went to [community college]." I'm like, "Well, this isn't like that."

Megan also referenced the difference in her experience, “I didn't get that experience that 18-year-olds get, where they just get to go and be young at a university. I didn't get that.” Julie and Cathy both expressed their fear about starting college at the point they were in their life. Julie explained, “I was really late starting, really late starting . . . and oh my goodness, that was a frightening experience.” Cathy put it this way,

> Well, it was . . . intimidating because I had no knowledge. I mean it's like, "Okay, you're paying for my school, I'm going to go, but I don't know what I'm doing." And some of the struggles was that I was older. I was 30 when I first started going back to school . . . even though I really wasn't because 30 isn't that old.

Associate degrees are commonly referred to as two-year degrees, despite the fact that completing them in this time frame requires full-time continuous enrollment for two years. However, many participants held the two-year timeframe as the expectation to which they compared their experience. Sabrina explained wanting to complete her degree faster, “I wanted to do it faster. It took me probably about four years I think, to complete it. A two year degree, it took me four years because I was only taking like six credits at a time.” Gabriella also wanted to complete her degree more quickly, “Just the class times, that was very difficult. I wanted to graduate a lot sooner than I did obviously.” Juanita was concerned about how long her associate degree was taking, but found out she would receive college credit for her CDA,

> I was thinking, “Oh my God, this is the second year.” It was my second. Supposed to be, to get the AA is two years doing the full-time student, but I was a part-time student. I would say, “AA was four years,” I was thinking.

The comments and conversation in the focus groups helped bring to light the sense that participants viewed this as their time to go to college, despite trepidation about age or preparedness. Juanita commented, “But in my days it was the opportunity that I

got, I got the opportunity was in the right time, right moments." Gabriella explained, "I think the first time I was approved from the training committee to go and get it, then I was like, 'This is going to happen.'" Megan summed up the conversation with,

> When I found Head Start and they basically were like, "We're going to take away all these barriers and we're going to pay for it, and we're going to let you do it." And I was like, "Okay, this is it." I was very excited. And from that, I was on that train and I was not going to get off. Absolutely not going to get off, I waited way too long. So it was worth it.

When I presented this preliminary theme about time to Focus Group Two Sabrina commented,

> I think that it's societal rules, basically. You're supposed to do this at this time, and this at this time. So then when you go back, and you're not doing the rules of society, then you feel like you're doing something wrong . . . I don't know if you feel the same way. Now I don't care.

Beneita responded, "I am thinking that I don't thinking in that. I am thinking that I have a goal and I want to get this goal, and I try to do the best I can, but I don't think about that." Although Beneita was focused more on the opportunity as she pursued her associate, she did admit she thinks about time as she considers her bachelor's degree,

> When I was taking my associate, I was not thinking of that, but then when I take my Associate and then I start to think about the BA, I am thinking, with my age maybe when I get my other degree, I go to study with my friend. We're laughing about that.

Cathy added that she had the feeling at 30 that it could be too late for her to pursue her education.

> For me, I was 30 when I went back to school. I got my GED at 30 and then I started taking classes. I did, I felt it might be too late to get some of this stuff going. But it wasn't, and I didn't get my degree until I was 50. And so, I feel I needed to get it done in a shorter amount of time . . . I felt like I should've got it sooner, but that's okay.

Another participant asked Cathy why she felt that way. Cathy explained, “Because I wasted the first 30 years of my life. I didn't do hardly anything. And so, I should've been farther along.” Sabrina and Cathy then both agreed this feeling was because of society’s expectations. Kim added,

> Well, my thoughts are, a lot of us didn't go to work until our babies were old enough to go to Head Start . . . That’s my feeling. I stayed home with my son ‘til he was six, the other one until she was able to go to Head Start. So that automatically is going to delay the age of being able to start college. My first job was to be their mother, and I was able to stay home with my kids. And then when they came to school, I just stayed with them there . . . And then the only reason the age of graduating went so long, was then you are wearing a million hats and you can't just focus.

Sabrina concluded,

> Well, I feel like now that I have more self-confidence and self-esteem and whatnot, I feel like it doesn't make a difference how long it takes you. You're still going to be that teacher eventually, and you're still going to make an impact on children's lives. So, does it matter when? No.

Cathy agreed,

> I think that the two-year degree thing, that doesn't mean anything, maybe . . . it's not like it's fresh out of high school, you took all these tests, and you're going to a four-year school, and you're fresh out of school. I mean, it's just not the standard of what everybody would do would be that two-year thing.

Regardless of the time that it took, each participant completed their associate degree. The next theme addresses the question of what support contributed to their earning the degree.

Completing the Degree: Support from Our Whole World

The participants perceived the support they received as critical in their earning of the associate degree, which is described by the theme *completing the degree: support from our whole world*. Support came from the Head Start Program and Head Start staff,

and financial support was critical for most participants. Early childhood education faculty provided support, and individual encounters with faculty were remembered. Family members were also an important source of assistance. In some cases, support from family was emotional, and in others, it was help with tangible tasks or resources. When I presented the idea of the importance of support to the participants in the focus group, the discussion further illuminated how critical they believed this support was. It became clear that participants saw the support as absolutely necessary, and the accumulation of assistance and encouragement in all of these areas helped propel them to completing their degrees. In Focus Group One, Juanita referred to the support as "crucial," Megan emphasized it was, "support from our whole world," and Gabriella went on to add, "it took just all the right people to make it happen."

The participants, with the exception of one, had the majority of their community college expenses paid by their Head Start employer. The value of this, and their appreciation of it, was expressed repeatedly by participants. Gabriella explained, "There is no way I ever could have paid for that on my own." Julie felt similarly, "I don't know if I could have afforded it any other way." Megan explained the value of the financial assistance noting this kind of support, "doesn't happen in my social class." Cathy credits Head Start with both the financial support and the support she needed as she attended community college, "There was no way I would have ever done it. No way."

In addition to the financial support, participants felt the support of their supervisors and co-workers at Head Start. Two participants even referred to someone at Head Start as a second mother. Juanita was able to use her work site for many of her assignments, "I

have the opportunity to use these tools that I have in my place work to use in my school. This is something that helped me a lot too." Sabrina also completed her practicum in her work site, and felt this relieved her of a great deal of anxiety. Gabriella said this about her Head Start program, "I just couldn't think of a better place to work . . . everyone was so supportive and it got to the point where people were working around it and no one ever complained."

Participants identified faculty as important to the completion of their degree and brought this up frequently when I asked about support, although it was also present as they discussed their learning. Participants shared examples of faculty providing them support as individuals. Beneita remembered a faculty member who made sure she had a book she needed, "This is a very big angel I have." Juanita, who did not receive as much financial support from Head Start as other participants, had a faculty member who helped her apply for scholarships. Kim, hearing, "You can do it. I know you can do it" from faculty, began to believe that she could, especially as they showed her how many classes she had completed toward her degree. Cathy shared her appreciation for the community college faculty during the focus group,

> I want to say that really meant the [most to] me was from the instructors at [community college] . . . I get emotional thinking about it because they made a big impact in my life. And if it wasn't for their encouragement . . . I would've had to have dropped because I couldn't finish them or want to at that time.

In addition to this individual support, participants reflected on how faculty and their approaches to teaching facilitated their learning. Julie remembered a particular faculty member's sensitivity in providing feedback to her, "She made it a very comfortable learning environment for me." Sabrina, who completed her degree online,

noted the responsiveness of faculty, “I had a lot of interaction with my teachers.” Juanita found that faculty helped her connect her learning to her experiences in her work,

> The whole story that was happening with a specific child, and the teachers helped me a lot. “You can talk with this way with the child. You can make this with the child.” All my assignments was about the children I was working.

Gabriella recalled an instructor who engaged her in learning noting, the instructor, “would just introduce us to so many new things we didn't know about and things to learn about, and I thought that was great.”

When I asked participants in the focus groups about what advice they would give community colleges, their responses emphasized the value the participants put on these personal connections from the college and faculty. Beneita advised community colleges, "Be sensitive with your students’ need[s]." Cathy explained that faculty could get to know their students, “Maybe at a different level and not superficial, more deeper level. This is why I'm doing what I'm doing. This is my heart.”

Participants generally also had the support of at least one family member. This included emotional sustenance and encouragement, but also tangible support with things such as household chores, child rearing, and finances. Kim recalled her mother and mother-in-law, neither of whom had attended college, encouraging her.

> My mom sometimes seemed like she was proud of me, or [husband’s] mom would be like, “You can keep going. You can do this.” . . . I don't think she wanted me to pull on a green chain or something like she did. She wanted me to do something more, so she would be like, “Keep going. You can do this. Don't let him tell you can't do it.” Because I don't know if anybody ever told her that. So, she would tell me that, and it felt good to hear her say that she thought I should go.

This support included help with her children, “I would be like, ‘Please. They're sick. I'm stuck at school. Can you please go get them . . . You're the only family we have in town.

Can you go get them?' And she would go get them." Beneita's husband was her biggest supporter, "My husband supported me a lot. I think if he . . . If I don't have one person like him, I can't do that," while Sabrina's grandmother helped her financially. Megan recalled her family understanding that she was not always available, "I had to say a lot, 'I can't do this, because I have to do homework.'"

Based on the literature, I had expected that support would factor into the participants' experiences, although the depth of its impact exceeded my presuppositions. However, I did not anticipate that I would find the deep commitment that the participants have to the Head Start program and mission.

A Deep Commitment to Head Start: I am a Lifer

The participants are committed to Head Start, I believe in part because of the support described as part to the last theme. Each of the participants expressed their intention to work for Head Start for a long time, if not for their whole career, leading to the emergence of the theme *a deep commitment to Head Start: I am a lifer*. Participants may have come to Head Start teaching as a Head Start parent or may have deliberately sought out employment with Head Start, but all held a deep commitment to Head Start, regardless of their path. During the focus groups, participants repeated and confirmed their commitment to Head Start and the children and families they serve. Although Cluster #3 focused on working for Head Staart, the findings that encapsulated the data related to this theme emerged across the clusters.

The work that the participants do at Head Start is not easy. In addition to working with children, they provide support to families. The participants expressed how important

this work is to them. Beneita, who early on actually paid someone else to run her home child care so that she could volunteer with Head Start, recalled being proud that her coursework was preparing her to meet the needs of the children and families at Head Start, “And I think the best for me is how I can help the families and children. This is something that I be proud on. I can help because I learned this way how I can help.” Megan described her experience at Head Start, saying

> You are a part of a community. You are also helping children, but you're not just helping and teaching children and getting them ready for kindergarten. You're also helping children who have been through trauma, who have less privileges than other people may have, and a million other things.

Participants seemed to feel a sense of being part of something, both in terms of serving the community and having a place where they belong. Gabriella came to work for Head Start as a substitute and plans to spend her career there, “I just fell in love with it right away, the first moment . . . I said, this is where I want to be.” Sabrina also referred to falling in love with Head Start after previously being in a business career. Julie plans to spend her career with Head Start, “I am a lifer. Yep, my heart is there.”

Part of the reason Juanita has continued to work for Head Start is that she is able to use her primary language, “The moment when I was working in the Head Start, there's a program that speaks Spanish. It's my language and I feel comfortable.” While working in the kitchen, she quickly asked, “How I can do to be a teacher?” Kim started with Head Start as a volunteer in her child’s classroom and recalled, “They all just kind of included me and helped me along the way and let me go to school. They never ever said no to a class. It was good. I've had a pretty good life.” For Cathy, Head Start feels like family, “I

feel as family and we're all one. It's not just the families we work with, but we are all important."

The conversation in the focus groups further emphasized that the participants are part of a community or culture. Despite coming from multiple programs, not knowing each other, and meeting over Zoom, the participants quickly connected in the small groups, sharing interest in each other's stories and empathy for one another's experiences. They asked each other questions about their work sites, and there was laughter and commiserating present throughout each of the focus groups. Gabriella remembered when she had the opportunity to take a class with her Head Start colleagues.

> There was one class where I knew about 70% of the students. They were other Head Start employees and I felt so comfortable and so good in that class like I could speak up and say anything. There's a lot of classes where we did group work and I did not like that because then you're working with strangers, which I know is what happens in the real life. But when you're working with all these people that you know and trust, and you're like, "Okay, I got this. I can participate and feel good about it and not so self-conscious.

Juanita referred to Head Start being home, a reference that others had made in the interviews, "I have already 20 years working with Head Start, and I feel like this is my home."

Although their Head Start co-workers figured prominently in their experience, the next theme illustrated the role participants had in their own success.

The Evolution of Self-Belief: I Can Do It, I Did Do It!

Whether a belief in themselves was present when they started taking classes, or whether it developed as they progressed through their courses, the participants believed in themselves. At some point in the journey to the degree, participants believed they could do it. The participants did not necessarily take their first class knowing they would

earn their degree, but they wanted the opportunity to learn and be good at the work they were doing. The essences of this theme were the most subtle, and, as such, the most challenging to put into words. In each focus group, I presented a preliminary theme that included the idea that believing in oneself mattered in earning the degree. What was missing from that iteration was the deep core of strength and determination that the participants possess. The thematic statement *the evolution of self-belief: I can do it, I did do it,* is intended to embody the ownership of this accomplishment that belongs to these women.

Some participants came to the community college knowing they could earn their degree. They might have had apprehensions or challenges, but they knew what their goal was, and they did not doubt they could reach it. Megan came into her program confident, "I knew [I could do it] from the beginning, because I wasn't going to stop . . ." and she continued that resolve, "Nothing stopped me from going to school. Nothing stopped me from doing my homework." Participants had experiences during their community college coursework that contributed to their belief in their ability to complete the degree. In some cases this was in contrast to previous experiences or messages they had received. Cathy recalled finding value for herself, "It took a while. It really did. I mean I probably was in school at least 10 years and I was starting to like, 'Okay, you know what? I am so worth it and I'm valuable.'" Julie also started her journey at the community college feeling uncertain,

> I didn't believe in myself. Nope. Nope, I didn't. I would guess it would be all of the instructors that believed in me. And I remember questioning myself. I guess I wanted to say it to them. How did you know I could do it? How did you know I could do it? That's what I wanted to say to them, because I didn't think I could. So I guess it was like I said, just reaching one milestone at a time. Then it starts to

> build your self-esteem, and it makes you realize that you can do more, and you can do anything you set your mind out to do.

As she progressed in her education, she found this resolve, “I've always worked full-time and juggled the coursework. It's not easy at all, but if that's the goal you have, then you find a way to do it, and you make time to do it.” Juanita also found the support of faculty and her grades contributed to her confidence,

> Even was difficult by the language especially when I need to pass in front and have any class that I need to make a presentation is because I don't have the inner confidence . . . Maybe they don't understand me. I was thinking and was frustrated. When I start talking and the teacher gave me a signal that I was doing good, that they understand me, I feel more comfortable and I continue with it. When I saw my grades, and I have good grades, I say, "Oh, I can do that. I can do that."

Coupled with participants’ growing belief that they could earn the degree was a sense that they wanted it. This is illustrated in both the recollections from their journey and the pride the participants have in this accomplishment. Cathy, who had joined in on taking classes when other Head Start staff invited her recalled wanting to be successful,

> I remember having some people help me and some of the instructors were so awesome because they worked with me and could see I was struggling. But I really wanted to get this education because it was being offered to me.

Beneita recalled, “I was so excited because all time I want to learn, learn things about almost anything . . . I have the opportunity to go to the college.” Beneita did not just want the degree for herself though, she wanted it for her children, “But inside of my head, I was thinking, I am doing something for them. Something maybe right now it's so sad, but maybe when they grow up they will understand my hard work that I did for them.” Her son actually gave her encouragement as a young boy, “My son, he was little, but he was like brought to me and say, ‘Look mom, you got to the school. And my aunts and my other family, they don't go to the school.’"

Juanita recalled others' belief in her and, ultimately, her belief in herself, "All these people . . . tell me, 'You can do it. You can do it.' I say, 'Okay, I can do it," and I can do it . . . I did it. I did it." In their conversation in Focus Group Two, participants recognized the impact of earning their degree on their self-esteem. Sabrina shared,

> I feel like for me, it was a self-esteem booster because I kind of found myself during that time. And because I dropped out of school when I was, I think I was in the ninth grade, I dropped out and then I went back, I got my GED . . . I feel like it just really boosted my self-esteem and who I was.

These five themes represent the experiences of the participants in community college from their individual and collective perspective. A variety of challenges and supports were illuminated by their stories. The following graphic representation provides additional analysis and depiction of the findings.

Interpretation of Findings: Graphic Representation

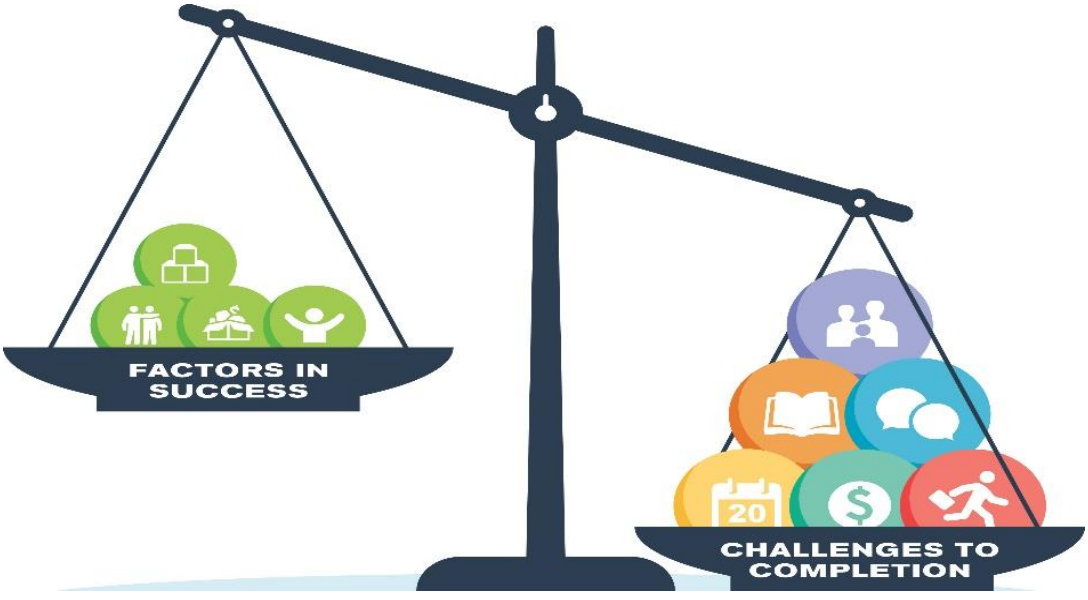
In addition to the narrative descriptions of the themes, the graphic representation provides another opportunity to interpret the findings. Morgan (2011) explained that the graphic is another "form of thematic structure" that provides the opportunity to "inter-relate [the] major themes" (p. 39). The graphic image that began to emerge around the fourth interview was a balance scale. As I considered the study purpose of describing the participants' experiences in community college early childhood education programs, it was quickly evident in the findings that they were balancing their roles and responsibilities, as is identified in the theme *juggling a complex life: it's a lot.* Ultimately, I also saw an element of balance in the other themes. The participants were balancing uncertainty about attending community college with a desire to learn. As they had experiences in their college courses, they were balancing old constructs about themselves

as students with a developing belief in themselves and their ability to be successful learners.

The two images of the balance scales illustrate the findings as they relate to the research questions regarding the challenges the participants faced and what were the factors in their success. The first balance scale (see Figure 1) shows the significant challenges the participants faced including family, home, and work responsibilities, academic coursework and preparedness, perceptions about time and age, finances, and language barriers, in terms of taking classes in a language that was not their primary language, but even the "lingo" used in the college setting. This image depicts the factors related to their success, such as support from family, interest in learning, and experience at Head Start, that are present early in the journey to some degree, but as the participants start college they are not fully developed, and not yet able to balance out the challenges.

Figure 1

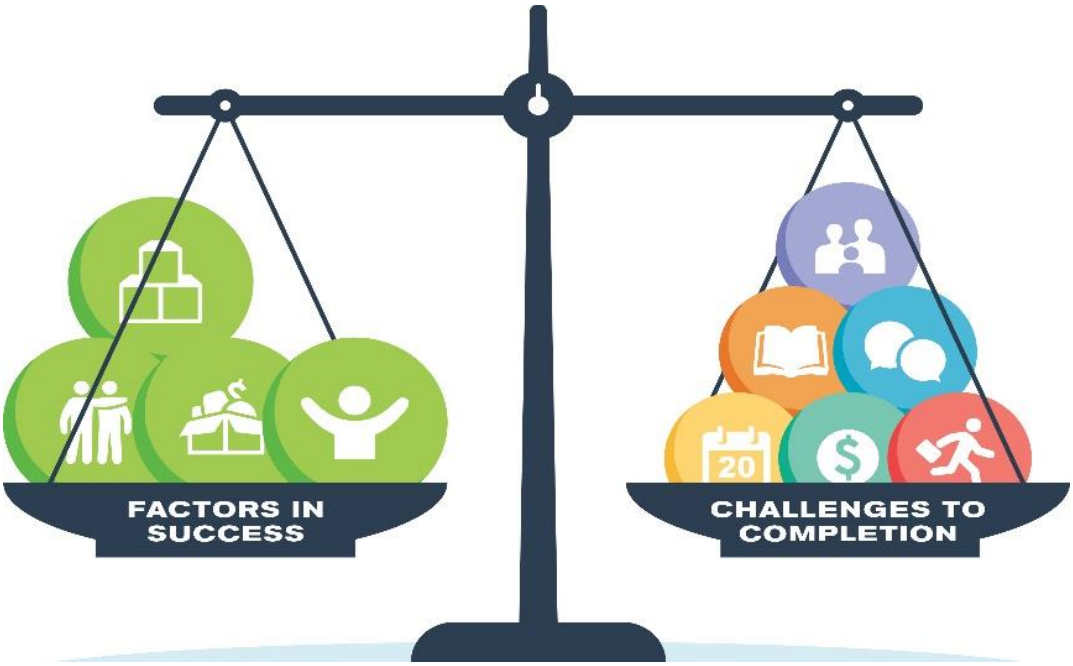
Balancing Challenges and Factors in Success: Early in the Journey



The second balance scale (see Figure 2) illustrates that for these participants the success factors did ultimately balance out the challenges, allowing them to complete their degrees. The factors related to success increased as the participants took classes. The participants received support from family, Head Start, and community college faculty. They may have started out with a supportive supervisor or partner, but this support grows to include a variety of people including parents, faculty, friends, and even their children. There is also a set of growing resources, such as financial help or advising. As the theme *commitment to Head Start: I'm a lifer* describes, there is also a growing commitment to Head Start and a deepening application of their learning in their roles at Head Start, creating a satisfaction that increases intrinsic motivation. The participants also experienced an emerging belief in their own ability, as expressed by the theme *an evolution of self-belief: I can do it, I did it*. As is represented in the graphic, these factors did not eliminate the challenges. However, the collective impact of the factors in success provided a balance to the challenges and created the conditions that allowed them to complete their degree.

Figure 2

Balancing Challenges and Factors in Success: Moving Toward and Completing the Degree



Discussion

Student success in the community college is generally defined as persistence toward and completion of a degree. Growing attention has been given to improving student success and completion; however, graduation rates are not increasing (Wyner, 2014). Despite facing the multitude of challenges common to adult learners, the study participants all earned their associate degrees. The findings revealed several factors that contributed positively to this phenomenon, such as support from family, faculty, and employers and the individual motivation and self-belief or mindset of the participants. At the same time, the participants all identified barriers that should be understood by

community colleges, community college faculty, and Head Start Programs, and that could inform university early childhood education programs.

Adult Learners and Success in the Context of Community College and Head Start Employment

Community college students often have their own children, nearly 75% are employed, and they are more likely to come from historically underrepresented groups (Wyner, 2014). The study participants reflected the characteristics of community college adult learners found in the literature. They were not enrolled in the ECE programs straight after high school, they were working, and they were caring for others (Ma & Baum, 2016). Three of the eight participants were Women of Color, and Spanish was the primary language for two of these participants. Two participants had previous college experience. As expressed in the theme *thoughts about time and age are connected to the college experience: this is my time*, the participants were cognizant of factors such as their age and the delay between this time in college and their completion of high school (Belcastro & Purslow, 2006). Additionally, as adults, they held previously constructed views of themselves as learners (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Merriam et al., 2007). While this may have included positive experiences, we can also see it required unlearning negative beliefs (Merriam et al., 2007; Walker, 2017). While each adult learner is unique, both the literature and the study findings indicate they face a multitude of challenges and barriers in the community college.

Challenges and Barriers. As articulated by the theme *juggling a complex life: it's a lot*, as adult learners, the participants faced many of the barriers found in the literature. These included home and family responsibilities, work, and, in some cases, a

lack of feeling prepared or confident in their ability (Osam et al., 2017; Spellman, 2007). Whitebook et al. (2010), identified balancing work and family, academic skills, and taking courses in English when that is not a student's primary language as challenges. The interviews brought to light the depth and impact of these realities. Participants had a variety of home responsibilities including domestic chores such as cooking or cleaning, caring for children, and caring for a partner. Participants talked about being tired or feeling as if they had work to do once they got home from work or school. As Sabrina said, "I was working and it felt like I come home and I would work. I only took like six credits at a time because that's all I can handle with work," and, as Cathy remembered, "As the time went on, it was real tiring being a single mom and going home and I was tired. You had to do all the domestic things and the work." The work at Head Start was challenging, too. Kim put it this way when I asked what was challenging, "Probably juggling, just mainly juggling my schedule . . . and still get everything done." Participants also perceived themselves to be at different levels of preparation; from Cathy who did not know what she was getting into, to Benita who felt ready to do something bold, to Megan who knew she would succeed.

For the participants whose primary language is Spanish, the interviews confirmed taking courses in English also added significant work and challenge (Spellman, 2007). They reported spending more time than they knew their peers were, as they wrote assignments in Spanish and the translated them into English, and spending a long time working their way through reading assignments. These participants also described their frustration with understanding the content and having opinions to share, but at the same

time, feeling uncomfortable doing so in what were in essence an English-speaking classrooms.

Course Scheduling. One interesting finding was the difficulty participants had with getting the courses they needed based on scheduling conflicts and being able to take the classes in an appropriate or required order. Gabriella recalled, "It took quite a while because I was working and the classes were during the day and it was so hard. I had to wait a semester to take a class. It got really difficult to consistently finish it." This finding illustrates that even students in a specific program, with what is typically a defined set of courses would have benefited from what Wyner (2014) called "clear pathways all the way to a certificate or degree" (p. 24). According to the Center for Community Student College Engagement's 2020 report *Building Momentum Using Guided Pathways to Redesign the Student Experience,* students benefit from in-depth academic advising and a clear sequence of courses that minimizes excess credits. Despite this, the same report indicated that nearly half of all community college students rely most heavily on friends, family, and other students as their main source of information for choosing classes. Most of the participants confirmed that their course path was what Kim aptly labeled "out of whack." On the other hand, when they did receive personalized advising, as Cathy did from her employer or as Megan did from a faculty advisor, it made a positive difference.

Paying for College. Due to the tuition support from Head Start, for the most part, the participants did not face the financial burden that many community college students face (Bailey, Jenkins et al., 2005; Spellman, 2007). This confirmed findings in the literature regarding the importance of financial support for college tuition for early

childhood education students (Whitebook et al., 2010; Booth et al., 2013). However, it should be noted that textbooks and transportation costs were still challenges. As Gabriella put it, “The price of books, I just, I can't believe how expensive they are” or as Cathy explained, “So I was able to do it. I don't know how. Gas and transportation, childcare.” Marx and Turner (2019) reported that beyond community college tuition “the remaining costs associated with college attendance—such as books and supplies and living expenses—may be important determinants of students’ success” (p. 71).

Engagement with the Institution and Faculty. The participants did not report being highly connected to the community college or even the early childhood education programs. However, one participant was part of an institution-wide program for English Language Learners. She described interventions such as a Spanish-speaking advisor, writing a letter of encouragement to herself, and assistance accessing scholarships, which provided her important support. Jenkins et al. (2006) advised proactive student supports and experimentation with ways to improve student success, while others recommend committing time and resources to bring programs to scale and addressing students’ foundational needs (CCCSE, 2012; Belcastro & Purslow, 2006). Ultimately, Hatch (2017) explained, engagement is not just something the student does; it is constructed as the student, peers, and family intersect. This construction of engagement was evident in the findings. Participants recalled uncertainty and apprehension about their age and what they would encounter at college and not being on the “traditional” college pathway. However, in the focus group they also pushed back on these norms and even their own perception, having constructed a new understanding of college, their ability to be

successful, and their right to access this education. This was particularly evident in Focus Group Two when Sabrina identified that their insecurities stemmed from what society was telling them, and Kim outlined very clearly why earning the associate degree took them more than two years.

The primary connection to the community college for the participants was the early childhood education program faculty, and ultimately, their learning. The participants identified this relationship as important to their success (Belcastro & Purslow, 2006). Despite this, community college success and improvement initiatives rarely focus on teaching and learning (Wyner, 2014). The participants' responses indicate that their interactions with faculty were the ones that connected them to the content they were learning and, in many cases, gave them the confidence to continue. As Kim remembered, faculty provided the feedback that kept her going, "You can do it. I know you can do it. You're almost there. Look. Look at all these classes you took. Look at all these."

According to Bain (2004), "the best teachers assume learning has little meaning unless it produces a sustained and substantial influence on the way people think, act, and feel" (p. 17), and college instructors should be focused on creating positive change that helps students apply learning in real-world situations. Julie remembered a faculty member who engaged her in hand-on learning, "She brought things to life for us and a lot of hands-on opportunities to practice and try things, and make all the hands-on materials that we would need, how to build our teacher resources and things like that." Eyler (2018) pointed out that the constructivist paradigm requires learners to be "active

participants in building concepts and knowledge for themselves" (p. 51). The "hands-on" work Julie described allowed her to build what she referred to as a "toolbox of resources."

Knowles' (1973) theory also identified value in leveraging the adult learners' experience and creating opportunities for the application of learning. The participants expressed that their work in the field led them to be engaged in their early childhood learning, especially when they had positive experiences applying what they had learned with children and families. Juanita remembered her interactions with her instructor and what she was learning this way, "Working and going to school was very interesting because when I was working with the children, I make another notes, questions. When I will return at school, I made these questions to my teacher." Cathy recalled connecting her coursework to her work with children, "I would go in the classroom and it'd be like, 'Oh, okay. He talked about this or she said that. And that's what I'm seeing.'" These examples illustrate the faculty and the students engaging in the curiosity and interest that leads to the construction of knowledge (Eyler, 2018). These findings also suggest this learning was taking place in the context of supportive relationships.

Support. Much of the literature related to supporting community college students focuses on the role of the institution (Jenkins et al., 2006; CCCSE, 2012). Some studies also consider faculty, friend, or employer support (Booth et al., 2013; Tran & Smith, 2017). In the case of the participants, they did not need to rely as heavily on the support of the college as an institution due to other supports. As identified in the theme *completing the degree: support from our whole world*, the participants perceived that the

support from Head Start, their family, and faculty allowed them to achieve their degrees. The participants consistently indicated that the support from their Head Start employer and colleagues figured prominently in their success. Key components of this included the already mentioned financial support, but also flexible schedules that allowed them to attend class, the ability to complete practicum at their worksite, the use of program technology resources, and of great importance, their supportive supervisors and co-workers. In addition to support from Head Start, participants relied on support from their families. They reported supportive spouses who cared for children or prepared meals, parents and grandparents who encouraged them or helped financially, and even their children such as Beneita's young son who encouraged her to continue taking classes.

Participants identified ways in which faculty supported them. E. Jones (2007) asserted, early childhood teacher educators should build upon student strengths. Participants shared examples that demonstrate this view. Julie recalled a faculty member who increased the amount and type of feedback she gave on writing assignments over time and Juanita remembered her instructor who actively expressed that she understood her language when she was presenting. The literature also indicates the importance of care and concern (Booth et al., 2013; Rowe & Fitness, 2018), or "simple decency" (Bain, 2004, p. 18). According to Kincheloe (2008), the constructivist teacher "learns to promote the welfare of their students," understanding the importance of relationships and the psychosocial context of the student and learning environment. This was reflected in Beneita's memory of the faculty member who made sure she had a textbook, in Cathy's story about the faculty member who allowed her to turn in work when she needed to go

to a treatment program, and in the faculty member who encouraged Juniata and her classmates to keep trying for scholarships. This support and the positive experiences it facilitated likely served as motivating factors.

Motivation. The participants in the study reflected that the motivations of adult learners are many and complex (Merriam et al., 2007). Participants did cite extrinsic factors such as wage increases and promotion as reasons for pursuing their degrees. As Merriam et al. (2007) identified, adults often cite job related motives for participating in organized learning. While it certainly stands to reason that work is a catalyst for adults pursuing higher education, for the participants this was coupled with, or in some cases quickly followed by, an intrinsic desire to learn and improve themselves. As articulated by the theme *the evolution of self-belief: I can do it, I did do it*, the participants constructed a strong internal drive to do well in their courses, and ultimately, earn their degrees. Explanations such as Beneita's, "I was so excited because all time I want to learn, learn things about almost anything," confirm that intrinsically motivated students enjoy learning and the sense of accomplishment it brings (Brewer & Burgess 2005).

The literature suggests that students who possess this self-authored motivation will have improved persistence and performance (Brewer & Burgess, 2005; Harris, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2005). This was evident in Juanita's explanation of what she says to other Head Start employees trying to get their degrees,

> If you say, "Oh, I'm going to this way. I'm going to finish it. I'm going to right to get, you can do it." I know you will have difficult time, and I use the same words that the others used to me when I was a student.

Harris (2011) asserted that this intrinsic motivation can be built through supportive instructors who are interested in and attentive to student needs, but also that it can be built through external factors such as grades. Many of the participants described being motivated when they received an A, especially in cases where they believed they might not be successful. While a desire to earn certain grades was likely a holdover from previous educational experiences focused on external measures of learning, I would put forth that while the findings suggest these external factors may have seemed to serve as early motivators, they actually served a more critical role in the construction of the students' own view of themselves as learners which is, ultimately, a better motivator. Sabrina said this about grades, "It empowered me, I think, again to feel good about myself when I was getting good grades and made me feel like I was accomplishing goals and so it made me feel good about myself." Beneita recalled faculty actively encouraging her to continue,

> And they say, "What classes do you want to take?" "I don't know, we are planning." And then they advise us and say, "This is the easy one. Maybe you take this, maybe take in this difficult time, when you work full time, maybe you take the easy ones, like one or two credits or three or something like that." And then we say, "Oh, okay." I was excited and say, "Oh, they pushed me, like support me to take classes to continue to my classes.

We see here that the faculty members seem to individualize and scaffold, or support, the student's intrinsic motivation by creating opportunities for success at different levels as the student moved through classes

Self-Belief. As described in the literature, the participants came to community college with a wide variety of experiences and views of themselves as learners (Harlow & Cummings, 2003). They had experiences in other school settings, such as high school

and in their families, which they brought to the learning experience. Some of the participants came to the community college confident in their ability and others were less certain they could be successful. On the one hand, there was Megan's experience, "I have always been told that I'm a good learner, so that can also be a lot with my upbringing, because my mom always told me that, teachers have always told me that." On the other hand, Cathy started out not seeing herself as capable. She described not seeing herself as someone who possessed knowledge or the ability stand up for their beliefs, yet ultimately being able to stand firm with her education. In both cases, participants shared a growing sense of belief in themselves as they accumulated positive experiences. Eyler (2018) noted, "at its core, constructivism is about empowering students to take control of their own learning" (p. 52).

Cathy's comments confirmed the assertion in the literature that students' self-efficacy, or beliefs about themselves as learners, affect them as learners (Van Dinther, 2011). As Kim explained, "It wasn't like I was like, 'I'm going to get my ECE degree. That's what I'm going to do.' I didn't have that in mind. I took class, class, classes here, classes there." Despite some variation, Manzano-Sanchez et al. (2018) found self-efficacy to be a constant predictor of success for Latinx students at all levels. Beneita passionately described wanting to learn things, but not having the opportunity, and then, when she got the opportunity to do so, she experienced earning better grades than she expected, building on her already strong sense of self. This is especially important when one considers that Beneita was taking classes in a language that was not her primary

language. She was not only constructing a belief in herself as a college student, but as a college student successfully taking classes in English.

The participants in the study seemed to be what Harlow and Cummings (2003) identified as *encounterers*, or those adult learners who are autonomous and curious. Megan was able to recognize she was learning, even when faced with the challenge of completing practicum away from her work site,

> I was learning. I learned so much. But I was absolutely miserable, because we were already so low staffed, and I'd dedicate myself to not just my classroom but also another classroom, because we didn't have another teacher for that classroom.

As Juanita said, "I learned this, no. When you feel that you can't do something, ask for help." Additionally, the participants' belief in themselves seems to be what Zepke and Leech (2010) described as malleable, which allowed for a growth in their belief in their ability, as evidenced in the theme, *the evolution of self-belief: I can do it, I did do it*. As Kim described, "I mean, I used to never speak up at staff meetings. Sometimes I'm the only one speaking up at staff meetings now, because I'm just like, 'What's the worst that could happen' . . . I don't think I would have done that before that."

The literature consistently identified the role of faculty in contributing to the development of students' view of themselves as capable college students (Bain, 2004; Chavez, 2006; E. Jones, 2007). Beneita shared, "I have a challenge too it was so hard, especially because English was my second language. This was very hard for me to try to understand everything, communicate . . . it was very hard for me." At the same time, she recalled an experience in which her instructor encouraged her to use her primary language Spanish with a group of English-speaking children,

> And I said, “Oh, she understand me very well.” And this is something that mark my life. And I say, “Oh, she knows.” . . . when we were [driving] home, the group of us was thinking, “Oh, this teacher is very, very sensitive and she know.”

According to Bain (2004), classes and assignments should create an opportunity for students to “try out their own thinking, come up short, receive feedback, and try again” (p. 28). Gabriella described learning about diversity and finding she had more to learn,

> I mean, I grew up in a very diverse place and of course I thought I knew everything, but [she] would just introduce us to so many new things we didn't know about and things to learn about, and I thought that was great.

Eyler (2018), encouraged college instructors to adopt constructivist strategies that emphasize the agency of the student. Online and math courses are examples of the sense of agency differing from student to student.

Student Perception of Self in Online and Math Learning. Participants had strong feelings about online learning, a modality often touted as an accessible solution for adult learners. In fact, when I asked about how they learned best, most brought up the idea of online learning versus face-to-face coursework. Study findings bear out the research that shows adults come to the learning experience with a belief about themselves as learners, in particular their ability to be successful online (Muse, 2003). Unfortunately, if they do not feel capable, their experiences may exacerbate those feelings (Walker, 2017).

Cathy felt like she needed to be in a face-to-face class to understand the content and, when she had a class with a teacher who was new to online teaching, this was confirmed for her. Although, she eventually figured it out, Gabriella had an ongoing struggle with her college’s online learning management system. In addition to challenges,

the participants identified ways in which online courses improved their access or learning experience. As Huang (2002) explained, adult learners' self-direction and autonomy affect the online learning experience. Sabrina felt that she could more easily focus online, and Megan preferred the control over her schedule that online learning afforded, "I like to know what I'm doing and knowing that, okay, I can read on this day, and I don't have to worry about being late to something."

Math course requirements in associate degrees are a barrier, or at least induce fear, for many community college students, and having to take developmental math courses can cost students time and money (Zientek et al., 2019). The participants reported a variety of experiences with math learning. Several identified the fear they had about taking a math course and that they put off taking math to the end of their degree. Sabrina's story in the focus group captured this experience,

> So I remember taking this math class and I remember just bawling my eyes out, like I can't do this! And I was talking to a co-worker and my husband and I just felt like it was the end of the world. And I ended up getting an A out of the class . . . I just have all this baggage from elementary school from, does that make sense?

The current study findings that in many cases the students earned higher grades and had more positive experiences than they expected, would seem to support assertions by Zientek et al. (2019) that "non-cognitive factors, particularly self-efficacy and physiological states, such as high levels of mathematics anxiety, might influence student success" (p. 184).

Summary

Adult learners face of variety barriers to earning their associate degrees at community colleges. The study findings illustrate the presence of these barriers, but also

identify the ways in which support can help overcome these challenges. Of particular importance was the participants' support from family, Head Start, and college faculty. While the participant reports show they were less engaged with the institutions, there were institutional-level issues that affected them, such as advising and course scheduling. The findings from this study also illuminate the importance of college faculty in both creating environments that allow Head Start employed students to utilize their experience in their learning and developing relationships that facilitate these adult learners in constructing a belief in themselves as capable college students.

In the next section, I discuss the implications of these findings for colleges, faculty, and Head Start programs.

Implications

This study describes the experiences of Head Start employed students who completed their associate degrees in community college early education programs. While the findings are the unique story of these individuals, they do provide an important window on the barriers and impact of supports from the student perspective. Given the similarities of this group to the broader community college student population, the findings also allow consideration of the community college student experience as a whole. In this section, I discuss the implications of the findings for community colleges, faculty, and Head Start programs. Although these students completed their degrees prior

to the COVID-19 pandemic, I also include a brief discussion of the impact this pandemic has had on community colleges and students as a point of special consideration.

Implications for Community Colleges

The advice given by the participants to the community colleges was quite simply to know them. I believe this advice demonstrates the participants' reflection back to the experiences when they felt known, and perhaps when they did not. In particular, this conversation reflected that the participants were working students and expectations like taking classes in the middle of the day posed a significant challenge for them. Frey (2007) explained, "Designing effective programs and services that break down barriers and help adult learners succeed requires a clear understanding of the students' needs and expectations" (p. 3) and, in addition to other tools, recommended an Adult Learner Committee to focus on the needs of this demographic. Commonalities such as being less prepared, part-time enrollment, lower socio-economic status, full-time employment, and families to support are all cited in the literature (Bailey, Jenkins et al., 2005; Jenkins et al., 2006). Colleges must undertake initiatives and build systems that recognize and address these challenges.

As found in the literature (M. T. Miller et al., 2005), all of the participants expressed that balancing work and school was a challenge, however none revealed any experiences in which college staff or faculty talked with them about this. They also recalled systems that were difficult to navigate because they were working, such as meeting with faculty or scheduling classes. Research indicates that students are more engaged when faculty or staff know how much they are working and help them make

decisions about balancing work and school (CCCSE, 2020b). Colleges should consider systematic ways to include this discussion in the college and course experience. The findings also indicated how critical effective advising was for the participants. This is widely supported in the literature as part of the Guided Pathways approach, which includes, among other strategies, clearly mapped out academic programs and mandatory student support services such as advising (Bailey et al., 2015). Further, E. Tovar's (2015) research regarding the persistence of Latinx students, indicated counselors should "assess students' needs, and identify areas of support already available to them, or introduce them to new reseources" (p. 11). As colleges attempt to put engagement and success initiatives into practice, professional development for faculty, staff, and administrators is recommended (CCCSE, 2012).

In a study of 900 California community college students, three quarters cited finances as a factor that influenced their persistence (Booth et al., 2013), and students faced with personal and financial challenges are less likely to succeed (Bailey, Calcango et al., 2005). Participants in the study identified the financial support they received as critical to their success. Given this, community colleges should consider initiatives that support and stabilize students paying for college. In addition to the financial support, Head Start supervisors and staff provided a variety of other supports. Community colleges could consider how they can replicate this level of support for other early childhood education students and students generally. Colleges must be aware of the learning and service needs of their students (Belcastro & Purslow, 2006; Chavez, 2006, Wyner, 2014). One community college is using its data to develop supports for low-

income students such as offering grocery and gas gift cards, while in another area of the country it makes more sense to provide cards for public transportation (Selingo, n.d.). Others have found that co-curricular activities and connection with the community, the number of credit hours a student earns, and embedding college success skills in the curriculum to be effective (Hatch, 2017).

How the participants saw themselves as learners, specifically in areas such as math or online learning, impacted their experiences. Colleges should consider how to proactively address these areas with early childhood education students and all adult learners. Yen and Liu (2009) found that students are more successful in online courses when they engage in intentional learning behavior. As colleges consider embedding skill development into courses (Hatch, 2017), this should include embedding strategies for online learning in online courses. Perhaps these strategies could also be leveraged to help overcome the shame and risk aversion that adults may bring with them to the learning experience (Walker, 2017). In math courses, research found that mastery experiences have high levels of correlation with student math self-efficacy, and that students benefit when activities and lessons focus on rebuilding their self-belief (Zientek et al., 2019).

Implications for Faculty

The theme *completing the degree: support from our whole world*, identifies how important support was to the participants in completing their degrees. The interviews illustrate the critical nature of dynamic between the student and faculty member. However, faculty can be left out of the student success and completion discussion (Bailey et al., 2015; League for Innovation in the Community College, 2018). This is clearly

problematic. I believe the study findings illustrate that faculty must be at the center of the conversation. The constructivist view implores us to value the point of view of the learner (Creswell, 2005), which may be gathered from the student themselves, but also with which faculty will have a great deal of first-hand experience. Eyler (2018) emphasized the importance of learning through social interactions, including classroom experiences that contribute to a sense of belonging to a community of learners. Kincheloe (2008) took this a step further, noting that constructivist faculty must be aware of the students' development of concepts, even "identifying the way students' prior knowledge interacts with academic and other newly encountered knowledge" (p. 71) to shape their understanding.

Faculty have the opportunity to engage Head Start employed students in the materials they are teaching by leveraging their experiences in the field (E. Jones, 2007; Knowles, 1973). Although the participants shared how they implemented what they were learning in their own classrooms, and that the content was valuable to them, they did not specifically identify being asked to share this in their community college classes. Perhaps this points out an opportunity for faculty to further draw upon the insights and experiences of the Head Start employed students in their classrooms (Chaves, 2006; Justice & Dornan, 2001). Adult learners are motivated by career and personal factors (Bailey, Jenkins et al., 2005). While the findings support this, they illustrate an *evolution of self-belief* that serves as an intrinsic motivator.

The study findings clearly support the notion that faculty must show care and interest in their students (Bain, 2004). Self-efficacy is a critical component of student

success and faculty are in a position to interact with students and utilize approaches to teaching and learning that build students' belief in their ability to be successful in college (Van Dinther, 2011). Faculty can build students' awareness of their growth and success, provide frequent and timely feedback, and be available to students to address confusion (Rowe & Fitness, 2018; Semmar, 2006; L. A. Tovar, 2008). Faculty can also share information with students about their own educational journey, including challenges and how they have successfully learned the subject matter (Bain, 2004). Given that so many students in the community college, and particularly Head Start employed students in early childhood education programs, come from populations that have been historically marginalized by educational and other systems, the burden for these debts must not be placed on the student. Faculty can embrace strategies such as those the participants shared, which allow students to incrementally construct their view of themselves as a college student and build the skills and approaches necessary for success.

Implications for Head Start Programs

The theme *a deep commitment to Head Start: I'm a lifer* highlights the dedication that these participants have to the children and families they serve and to the Head Start program. This commitment should not go unnoticed or be taken for granted by Head Start leaders, from local sites to the federal Office of Head Start. While I have known many dedicated Head Start teachers throughout my years in education, the depth of this allegiance was an unexpected finding. My hope would be that the Head Start program would take note that funding for education, which research shows positively impacts persistence (Tran & Smith, 2017), coupled with a strong culture of support, can pay off

when these individuals stay with the program for the duration of their careers. When one considers the stubbornly high teacher turnover rate in early childhood education, and the negative impact it has on children's learning, holding on to these dedicated professionals is critical (Wells, 2015).

Further, these participants represent the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity from which the children and families in these programs benefit (Espinosa, 2010; Villegas et al., 2012). Perhaps there is a lesson for Head Start in recent research findings from other career areas that showed new community college graduates possessed skill in what they studied, but lacked employability skills such as decision-making and ability to interact with clients (Gauthier, 2020). I would propose this problem might be avoided by promoting existing staff and Head Start parents through education. These staff members and parents bring experience and insights about families and reflect the local community. They are likely to share the language and culture of children and families served in the program and can draw on their own personal experiences in relating to families. As the participants noted, those who come to Head Start without these experiences may not be prepared for the varied responsibilities their roles at Head Start involve or the level of crisis and trauma that may be faced by Head Start families. While, at times, the challenges these families face can be ignored, the COVID-19 pandemic quickly and utterly revealed the disparities tied to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in the U.S.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Community College

By the winter of 2020, three of the eight interviews for this study had been completed. Community colleges were completing their winter term or were partway through their spring semester. It would be an understatement to say that no one was prepared for what was about to happen. Amidst breaking news of the COVID-19 pandemic, classes were cancelled, campuses closed, and how to deliver coursework or administer finals was on everyone's mind. At the same time, Head Start programs experienced closures of their sites and supervisors and communities scrambled to figure out how to continue services for children and families.

While the pandemic caused a short break in my collection of data, and introduced some new obstacles for recruiting participants, the participants in this study had completed their coursework prior to COVID-19. By the time I met again with the participants for the focus groups, all continued to work for Head Start and were providing services virtually or in person at sites where classrooms had reopened. While the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked much conversation related to early learning and equity, based on the focus of this study, I have elected to comment on what the pandemic has revealed in the community college.

The COVID-19 pandemic led many community colleges to quickly shift to online and remote learning (Kelly & Zakrajsek, 2021). While these institutions quite likely had previously offered online learning opportunities, many students and faculty lacked experience in the modality, and as the findings from this study show, not all students consider online courses their ideal learning option. In addition, many students lacked the

technology or even Internet access to successfully complete their courses. Further, beyond the classroom, the lives of community college students were being disproportionality impacted by the pandemic in ways we are only beginning to understand. While ongoing and future research will provide a clearer picture of this impact, early reports make clear that the underserved populations that attend community colleges are among the hardest hit. One of the most disturbing statistics came in October of 2020, with reports that as many as 40% of households who had a member planning to attend community college reported they were cancelling those plans, and another 15% were planning to take fewer credits or change majors. Most troubling, those from low-income households reported more often that they were exiting the community college (Belfield & Brock, 2020).

One piece of good news revealed in early studies was that the benefits of the associate degree continued to hold true. In April 2020, data showed that those with associate degrees were experiencing lower unemployment. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic had not altered the 15% earning advantage associate degree holders have over high school graduates (Belfield & Brock, 2021).

Given that community colleges are likely to see decreased local funding and "raising tuition further seems untenable during a time of record unemployment" (Jenkins et al., 2020), community colleges will face difficult decisions about how to meet the needs of their students and communities recovering from COVID-19. I believe the findings from this study underscore the role of community colleges in serving the nation's vulnerable populations. As discussed in the preceding section regarding

implications, these times call for community colleges to know their students and provide services that support and guide them toward success. The findings also call upon faculty to understand the psychosocial factors and context that their students face (Kincheloe, 2008) and adjust and align their approaches and methods to this context. This may mean teaching differently or it may mean leaning even further into what faculty have found works for their students, but it undoubtedly means showing care and concern (Bain, 2004) for those who come to learn at the community college. It is my hope that the needs of community college students that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed will lead to continued research about their needs. Following a brief discussion of the limitations of this study, I provide recommendations for future research.

Limitations of the Study

There were both logistical and inherent limitations to this study. The primary limitation was recruitment of participants.

Participant Recruitment

I made many efforts to recruit participants through outreach across the country, via Head Start programs and community college early childhood education programs. However, in the end, those who chose to participate in the study were in some way connected to what I would call my professional network. In other words, while I did not know the majority of the participants prior to the study, they generally came to participate through a series of connections of individuals, with at least one person in the series knowing me in a professional capacity. While I do not want to diminish in any way the very important and powerful story of the community of participants, the group does not

fully represent the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the national Head Start teaching population. For the participants who speak Spanish as their primary language, an opportunity to be interviewed by a Spanish-speaking interviewer may have provided an opportunity for them share additional or different perceptions of their experience. Further, while the participants do in many ways embody the demographics of the teaching population in the regions from which they come, greater representation of BIPOC participants would have more fully represented both the Head Start employee and community college student population.

In the Northwest state in which the study was conducted, two percent of the population is Black and one percent is Native American (Oregon Health Authority, 2018). Nationally, the historical ties between these communities and Head Start is profound and participants from these groups would allow for greater insight into the experience of Head Start employed students in the community college. Findings from Cunningham-Erves et al. (2017) illustrated the challenges of recruiting diverse groups for research studies, in particular individuals who have historically been marginalized through institutional and systemic racism. Further, approaches that may have served to develop rapport or trust with potential participants were hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because nearly all recruitment efforts were conducted using virtual tools, such as email, and Head Start programs faced closures and restrictions, it was not possible for

me to travel to different regions of the state or country to meet with groups in person, which may have diversified the participant group.

Participant Perception

Another limitation of this study is the nature of the volunteer participant. For the most part, despite the challenges and barriers they faced, the participants reported positive experiences with both Head Start and the community college early childhood education programs they attended. It is possible, if not likely, that this positive perception of their experience made these participants more likely to volunteer for the study. This would seem particularly true for the participants who graduated from the early childhood education program at the college where I have been a faculty member. Further, both these participants and those who I did not know prior to the study, were generally made aware that I am currently employed as a community college dean, making it even further possible that they were more likely to participate if they had a positive perception of their experience in the community college.

As the study findings illustrate, Head Start employees who complete their associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs face struggles and challenges that not everyone would be comfortable sharing. A component of this type of study is participant control over what information is shared. While the interview is designed to solicit as much information about the experience as possible, it is up to the participant to determine what they share with the researcher. Further, the

phenomenological design seeks to understand the participants' perception or their constructed, subjective reality (Kincheloe, 2008).

Limitations of the Phenomenological Method

The very nature of the phenomenological study creates an inherent, though intentional limitation. The number of participants is limited in order to allow in-depth study of their experience (Morgan, 2011). Additionally, the participants must have experienced the specific phenomena being explored. In this case, that limits participants to those who have completed the associate degree in early childhood education while employed by Head Start. It may be of interest, for example, to also study the experience of individuals who did not complete their degree, which would not be included in this study. As is noted above, this method relies solely on the participants' report of their perception of the experience. Additionally, despite my efforts to seek neutrality and avoid bias through bracketing, these can never be fully disentangled from the study (Schwandt, 1998). While I am including these as limitations of the study, as has been discussed throughout this paper, these very limits serve to create the opportunity to value and bring forth the lived experiences of the participants.

Recommendations for Future Research

Each of the themes that emerged in the study could provide an avenue for further research. Both qualitative and quantitative inquiries that look at the responsibilities, time and age perceptions, supports, and motivation and self-belief of the Head Start employed student could be pursued. In addition, deeper understanding of the commitment to Head Start could provide important insight for that program. Further, the findings from this

study could be used as a starting point for consideration of the experience of other students in community college early childhood education programs.

Addressing the Study Limitations With Further Research

The first area of future study I would recommend would be research that draws from the powerful stories of these participants, but addresses the limitations of this study. Conducting a similar study in a different geographical area or simply by a researcher with a different network would create an opportunity to more deeply understand the perceived experience of Head Start employed students in community college early childhood education programs, the barriers they face, and the factors in their success. Further, conducting a similar study in Spanish or another language would allow participants whose first language is not English to more fully express their experience. Asking similar questions in different contexts would allow for further application of what this study has revealed about the experiences of Head Start employed students who earn their associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs. Future research could also explore the experiences of Head Start employed students who took courses but did not complete their degrees, providing additional perspective regarding the challenges and factors in success in community college early childhood education programs for these students.

Adult Learners and the Math Requirement

As part of completing their associate degrees in early childhood education, participants were required to complete one math course. For some, this included also completing pre-college or developmental level math courses as a prerequisite to their

program's required course. The participants shared the challenges they faced with math coursework, but notably their lack of belief in their ability to be successful in math. This is evident in the stories from Sabrina, Kim, and others. As an area of further study, early childhood education and adult students' view of their math ability, and what interventions might be effective in positively impacting this as they enter or contemplate enrolling in early childhood education programs, could be considered. Additionally, as we contemplate Gabriella's question about the math requirement when she is teaching "counting teddy bears", the options and effectiveness for early childhood specific co-requisite or contextualized courses could be studied (Jenkins et al., 2018). Given that studies show teachers' beliefs about math impact children's math learning, math learning for teachers should focus specifically on building their confidence (Geist, 2015).

Understanding and Leveraging the Impact on Adult Learners' Children

Although not determined to be a theme in this study, the participants' reflections on the impact of their experience on their own children could be considered for future research. In the interviews, participants shared their belief that earning their associate degree had a positive impact on their own children, and specifically that seeing them work hard to do this was beneficial to them. While supporting student-parents is a topic of existing research, future research could explore how the impact on their children could serve as a motivating factor for community college students, given the that 30% of community college students are parents (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2014).

Community College Students and Their Success

Education provides an opportunity for economic security, and community colleges provide adult learners affordable access to education (Frey, 2007). The study participants reported that their community college education allowed them to obtain, stay in, or move up in their position with Head Start, and to better meet the needs of the children and families they work with in Head Start. While this study examined the experiences of Head Start employed students, the story of these students is in many ways the story of adult learners in the community college. These students face a wide range of challenges and barriers; however, if we change the student experience, we can produce better outcomes (CCCSE, 2020a). Community college students, who often represent the most historically underserved and underrepresented populations in society, should be the focus of significantly more research resources. In this study, I learned from the participants that they faced nearly overwhelming barriers to degree completion and that institutional and relational supports were critical to their success. Continuing to explore these findings through both qualitative and quantitative research, and committing to bringing the programs and interventions that work to more students, will not only serve community college students, but society as a whole.

Conclusion

Head Start programs have faced decades of federal mandates to increase the education levels of the teaching staff. At the same time, community members and parents have been hired as teachers and for support roles without having first earned a degree. These existing staff members likely represent the racial, ethnic, and linguistic background

of the families served in the local community. I argued that community colleges play an important role in educating these staff, as they have long served as a local access point for similar historically underserved populations of students. Unfortunately, community colleges have struggled to improve their completion rates. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of Head Start employed students in the community college.

The study findings, in the form of narrative of the participant responses in interviews and focus groups were organized into six clusters and provide a richly layered description of the Head Start participants' experiences in community college early childhood education programs. The five themes that emerged from the findings were:

- Juggling a complex life: It's a lot.
- Thoughts about time and age are connected to the college experience: This is my time.
- Completing the degree: Support from our whole world.
- A deep commitment to Head Start: I'm a lifer.
- The evolution of self-belief: I can do it, I did it!

The participant accounts, the graphic representation, and the themes provide insight into the research questions regarding what challenges these students faced and factors that were important to their success. The challenges illuminated in the findings aligned with those found in the literature such as balancing work, family and school, ability to access classes and advising, and overcoming previous negative views of oneself as a learner. The factors that contributed to the participants' success were also aligned with the literature, with an emphasis on institutions knowing students and their needs and faculty

providing learning opportunities that acknowledge and leverage these adult learners' experiences. Based on these findings about Head Start employed students, specific implications for institutions, faculty and Head Start were discussed and recommendations for future research were provided.

A Final Thought

The final recommendation of this study comes from the participants. It was important to them, as people who have experienced earning their associate degrees in community college early childhood education programs, that this report communicate to other Head Start employees that they too can earn their degrees. As Beneita said, "This how I want to participate in this [study], because I want to . . . I can help a little bit with somebody that they say, 'No, I can't do that.' Say, 'Yeah, we can, because that's so hard. It's not easy, but we can.'"

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Appendix A: Recruiting Email

Original Recruiting Email
Sent to Head Start Education Coordinators, Community College Faculty and Community Partners

Dear Partners,

I am seeking people who were employed by Head Start when they earned their associate degree in ECE for a research study. I am emailing you to ask that you share this information with employees, former students, and other you may know who may meet these criteria. The purpose of the study is to understand these experiences of these individuals and factors that lead to success in these programs.

Participants in the study will be asked to:

- Participate in one initial interview of approximately 90 minutes and one shorter follow-up interview to clarify their responses of less than 60 minutes.
- Participate in an optional small group focus group discussion of the research.

The research will take place between September of 2019 and March 2020.

For more information, please don't hesitate to contact me via email or at 503.399.5048.

Thank you,

R. Taylor
Principal Investigator

Dean
Business and Technology, Early Childhood Education, and Visual Communication
Chemeketa Community College

Addition 10/11/19
Please also feel free to share this email with others who you think may be interested or know of others who might want to participate.
These to the
Other to others

Appendix B: Head Start Research Study (English)

Portland State UNIVERSITY

SEEKING VOLUNTEERS FOR A RESEARCH STUDY

The purpose of this research study is to understand the experience of individuals who completed their associate degree in ECE while employed with Head Start and the factors that helped them be successful.

To participate in this research:

- You must have completed your associate degree while employed by Head Start
- You do not need to be employed by Head Start currently

Participants in the study will be asked to:

- Participate in one initial interview of approximately 90 minutes and one shorter follow-up interview to clarify your responses of less than 60 minutes about your experience as an early childhood community college student and your related experiences working for Head Start.
- Interviews will take place via Zoom or phone to allow for health and safety during COVID-19.
- Participate in an optional small group focus group discussion of the research.

If you are interested in participating or to find out more information about this study, please contact R. Taylor at:

Email: r.taylor@chemeketa.edu
Text: 503-576-XXXX
Phone: 503-399-XXXX (message)

Study Title: ***Head Start Teachers' Experience in Community College Early Childhood Education Programs: A Phenomenological Study of Factors in Successful Programs***

Version: 4.30.2020

Appendix C: Head Start Research Study (Spanish)

SE SOLICITAN VOLUNTARIOS PARA UN ESTUDIO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

El propósito de este estudio de investigación es para entender mas a fondo las experiencias de personas que obtuvieron su licenciatura de dos años en el programa de ECE mientras estaban empleados por Head Start, y llegar a conocer los factores que contribuyeron a que tuvieran éxito.

Para participar en esta investigación:

- Tiene que haber terminado su licenciatura de dos años.
- No es un requisito estar empleado con Head Start en este momento.

Participantes en esta investigación se les pedirá que:

- Participen en una entrevista inicial la cual se llevará a cabo por 90 minutos, y también en una entrevista de seguimiento para aclarar sus respuestas que se llevara a cabo por 60 minutos sobre su experiencia como estudiante de educación temprana por medio del colegio comunitario, y sus experiencias trabajando para Head Start.
- Las entrevistas se harán por Zoom o por teléfono para seguir tomando las precauciones de salud y seguridad durante la pandemia de COVID-19.
- Participe en un grupo de enfoque pequeño para hablar más sobre las investigaciones.

Si tiene interés en participar o quisiera mas información sobre esta investigación favor de contactar a: R. Taylor; correo electrónico: r.taylor@chemeketa.edu; por texto: (503) 576-XXXX; por teléfono: (503) 399-XXXX (favor de dejar mensaje)

Título de Investigación: ***La experiencia de Maestros de Head Start en los programas de educación temprana por medio del colegio comunitario: Un estudio fenomenológico sobre los factores que hace programas exitosos.***

Appendix D: Reunión Comunitaria Invitation

Please share this invitation with current or former Head Start Staff

Reunión Comunitaria
October 12, 5:00 PM
Zoom Meeting
Join Zoom Meeting Here

Please join me for a short meeting to learn more about this study and ask any questions you may have about participating.

I am seeking people who were employed by Head Start when they earned their associate degree in Early Childhood Education for a research study. I am emailing you to ask that you share this information with employees, former students, and others you may know who may meet this criteria. The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of these individuals and factors that lead to success in ECE associate degree programs.

Estoy buscando a personas que fueron empleadas por Head Start cuando obtuvieron su título de enseñanza temprana para hacer esta investigación. Les mando los detalles para que puedan compartirlo con empleados, estudiantes, o otras personas que quizás llenen los requisitos. El propósito de esta investigación es para poder entender mejor por medio de las experiencias se los participantes cuales fueron los factores que los llevo a tener éxito en el programa de ECE.

Participants in the study will be asked to:
Participate in one initial interview of approximately 90 minutes .
Participate in an optional small group focus group discussion of the research.

Las personas que participen es esta investigación se le pedirá:
Que participen en una entrevista inicial de aproximadamente 90 minutos sobre su experiencia como estudiante de educación temprana por medio del colegio comunitario, y sus experiencias trabajando para Head Start.

Participe en un grupo de enfoque pequeño para hablar más sobre las investigaciones.

 Thank you 

R. Taylor
Chemeketa Community College
r.taylor@chemeketa.edu

Appendix E: Consent to Participate in Research (Interview)

Consent to Participate in Research

Project Title: Head Start Teachers' Experience in Community College Early Childhood Education Programs: A Phenomenological Study of Factors in Successful Programs

Researcher: R. Taylor, Portland State University (Doctoral Student)

Dr. John Nimmo, Portland State University (University Adviser)

Researcher Contact: r.taylor@chemeketa.edu/ 503.399.XXXX

You are being invited to take part in a research study. The study explores the experience of Head Start-employed community college early childhood education students. The box below highlights key information about this research for you to consider when making a decision about whether or not to participate. Carefully review the information provided on this form. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide to participate. We also encourage you to talk with your colleagues, family and friends before you decide to participate.

Key Information for You to Consider
• **Voluntary Consent**. You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There is no penalty if you choose not to participate or if you discontinue participation. • **Purpose**. The purpose of this research is to understand the experience of individuals who earned their associate degree in early childhood education while employed by Head Start. Understanding this experience may lead to further knowledge about what helps people be successful in early childhood education programs and community colleges. • **Duration.** It is anticipated that your participation will be approximately 4 hours and will take place between September 2019 and July 2020. • **Procedures and Activities.** You will participate in up to two interviews via video conference or telephone about your experience as an early childhood community college student and your related experiences working for Head Start. You will also have the opportunity to participate in a small group focus group discussion with other participants about the research, but this is not required. A separate consent form will be completed for the focus group.

- **Risks.** Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation include answering questions about the challenges and successes you experienced as a community college student while those answers are being recorded or someone identifying that you are a participant in the study.
- **Benefits**. No direct benefits will be provided to you as part of anticipating in this study. You may enjoy reflecting on your experience and feel empowered in other educational pursuits through this reflection.
- **Alternatives.** Participation is voluntary and the only alternative is to not participate.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of the research is to understand the experience of Head Start-employed students in community college early childhood education programs. You are being asked to participate because you completed your associate degree in early childhood education while employed by Head Start. About 10 people will take part in this research.

What happens to the information collected?

Your participation will be documented through written notes and digital audio recordings. Information collected for this research will be used in a doctoral dissertation that will be available on the Portland State University website and may be utilized in future presentations or articles. No information that identifies you personally will ever be used or published.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?

We will take measures to protect your privacy by using a different name for all participants in any written documents, leaving out any information that might identify you, such as where you work, from any written documents, and keeping all information in a locked office or on a password-protected computer. Despite taking steps to protect your privacy, we can never fully guarantee that your privacy will be protected. Participation in the focus group does not allow for the same level of confidentiality as the individual interviews. As a participant in these groups, you are encouraged not to speak about what was discussed during the group once it has ended.

The Institutional Review Board at Portland State University may be permitted access to inspect research records. This may include private information.

What will happen if I choose to participate?
If you take part in this research, you will participate in one initial interview of approximately 90 minutes and one shorter follow-up interview to clarify your responses of less than 60 minutes. Both interviews are about your experience as an early childhood community college student and your related experiences working for Head Start. You will also have the option to participate in a small group focus group with other participants following the interview.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?
Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you may stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to participate in any study activity or completely withdraw from participation at any point. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the researchers or Portland State University.

Will I be paid for participating in this research?
You will not be paid for your participation in this research.

Who can answer my questions about this research?
If you have questions, concerns contact:

R. Taylor
503.399.XXXX
r.taylor@chemeketa.edu

Who can I speak to about my rights as a research participant?
The Portland State University Institutional Review Board ("IRB") is overseeing this research. The IRB is a group of people who independently review research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. The Office of Research Integrity is the office at Portland State University that supports the IRB. If you have questions about your rights, or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:

Office of Research Integrity
PO Box 751
Portland, OR 97207-0751
Phone: (503) 725-5484

Toll Free: 1 (877) 480-4400
Email: hsrrc@pdx.edu

Consent Statement
I have had the opportunity to read and consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions necessary to make a decision about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions throughout my participation.

By signing below, I understand that I am volunteering to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been provided with a copy of this consent form. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to provide consent prior to me continuing in the study.

I consent to participate in this study.

Name of Adult Participant	**Signature of Adult Participant**	**Date**

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)
I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

Name of Research Team Member	**Signature of Research Team Member**	**Date**

+Version: 7/31/19

Appendix F: Consent to Participate in Research (Focus Group)

Portland State UNIVERSITY

Consent to Participate in Research

Project Title: Head Start Teachers' Experience in Community College Early Childhood Education Programs: A Phenomenological Study of Factors in Successful Programs

Researcher: R. Taylor, Portland State University (Doctoral Student)

Dr. John Nimmo, Portland State University (University Adviser)

Researcher Contact: r.taylor@chemeketa.edu/ 503.399.XXXX

You are being invited to take part in a focus group for this research study. The study explores the experience of Head Start-employed community college early childhood education students. The box below highlights key information about this research for you to consider when making a decision about whether or not to participate. Carefully review the information provided on this form. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide to participate. We also encourage you to talk with your colleagues, family and friends before you decide to participate.

Key Information for You to Consider
• **Voluntary Consent**. You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There is no penalty if you choose not to participate or if you discontinue participation. • **Purpose**. The purpose of this research is to understand the experience of individuals who earned their associate degree in early childhood education while employed by Head Start. Understanding this experience may lead to further knowledge about what helps people be successful in early childhood education programs and community colleges. • **Duration.** It is anticipated that your participation will be approximately 4 hours and will take place between September 2019 and July 2020.

- **Procedures and Activities.** You have participated in up to two interviews about your experience as an early childhood community college student and your related experiences working for Head Start. You also have the opportunity to participate in a focus group discussion via video conference or telephone with other participants about the research, but this is not required.
- **Risks.** Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation include answering questions about the challenges and successes you experienced as a community college student while those answers are being recorded or someone identifying that you are a participant in the study.
- **Benefits**. No direct benefits will be provided to you as part of anticipating in this study. You may enjoy reflecting on your experience and feel empowered in other educational pursuits through this reflection.
- **Alternatives.** Participation is voluntary and the only alternative is to not participate.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of the research is to understand the experience of Head Start-employed students in community college early childhood education programs. You are being asked to participate because you completed your associate degree in early childhood education while employed by Head Start. About 10 people will take part in this research.

What happens to the information collected?

Your participation will be documented through written notes and digital audio recordings. Information collected for this research will be used in a doctoral dissertation that will be available on the Portland State University website and may be utilized in future presentations or articles. No information that identifies you personally will ever be used or published.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?

We will take measures to protect your privacy by using a different name for all participants in any written documents, leaving out any information that might identify you, such as where you work, from any written documents, and keeping all information in a locked office or on a password-protected computer. Despite taking steps to protect your privacy, we can never fully guarantee that your privacy will be protected. Participation in the focus group does not allow for the same level of confidentiality as the individual interviews. As a participant in these groups, you are encouraged not to speak about what was discussed during the group once it has ended.

The Institutional Review Board at Portland State University may be permitted access to inspect research records. This may include private information.

What will happen if I choose to participate?
If you take part in the focus group you will meet via video conference or telephone to review the initial research themes, answer additional questions about your experience, and share additional information about your experience as a Head Start employed ECE student that you think is relevant to the study.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?
Your participation is the focus group voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you may stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to participate in any study activity or completely withdraw from participation at any point. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the researchers or Portland State University.

Will I be paid for participating in this research?
You will not be paid for your participation in this research.

Who can answer my questions about this research?
If you have questions, concerns contact:

R. Taylor
503.399.XXXX
r.taylor@chemeketa.edu

Who can I speak to about my rights as a research participant?
The Portland State University Institutional Review Board ("IRB") is overseeing this research. The IRB is a group of people who independently review research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. The Office of Research Integrity is the office at Portland State University that supports the IRB. If you have questions about your rights, or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:

Office of Research Integrity
PO Box 751
Portland, OR 97207-0751

Phone: (503) 725-5484
Toll Free: 1 (877) 480-4400
Email: hsrrc@pdx.edu

Consent Statement
I have had the opportunity to read and consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions necessary to make a decision about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions throughout my participation.

By signing below, I understand that I am volunteering to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been provided with a copy of this consent form. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to provide consent prior to me continuing in the study.

I consent to participate in this study.

Name of Adult Participant	**Signature of Adult Participant**	**Date**

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)
I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

Name of Research Team Member	**Signature of Research Team Member**	**Date**

Version: 7/31/19